

Accomplishments *of the* Duke's Daughter

NOVEL

5

Written by **Reia**
Illus. Haduki Futaba



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Leticia

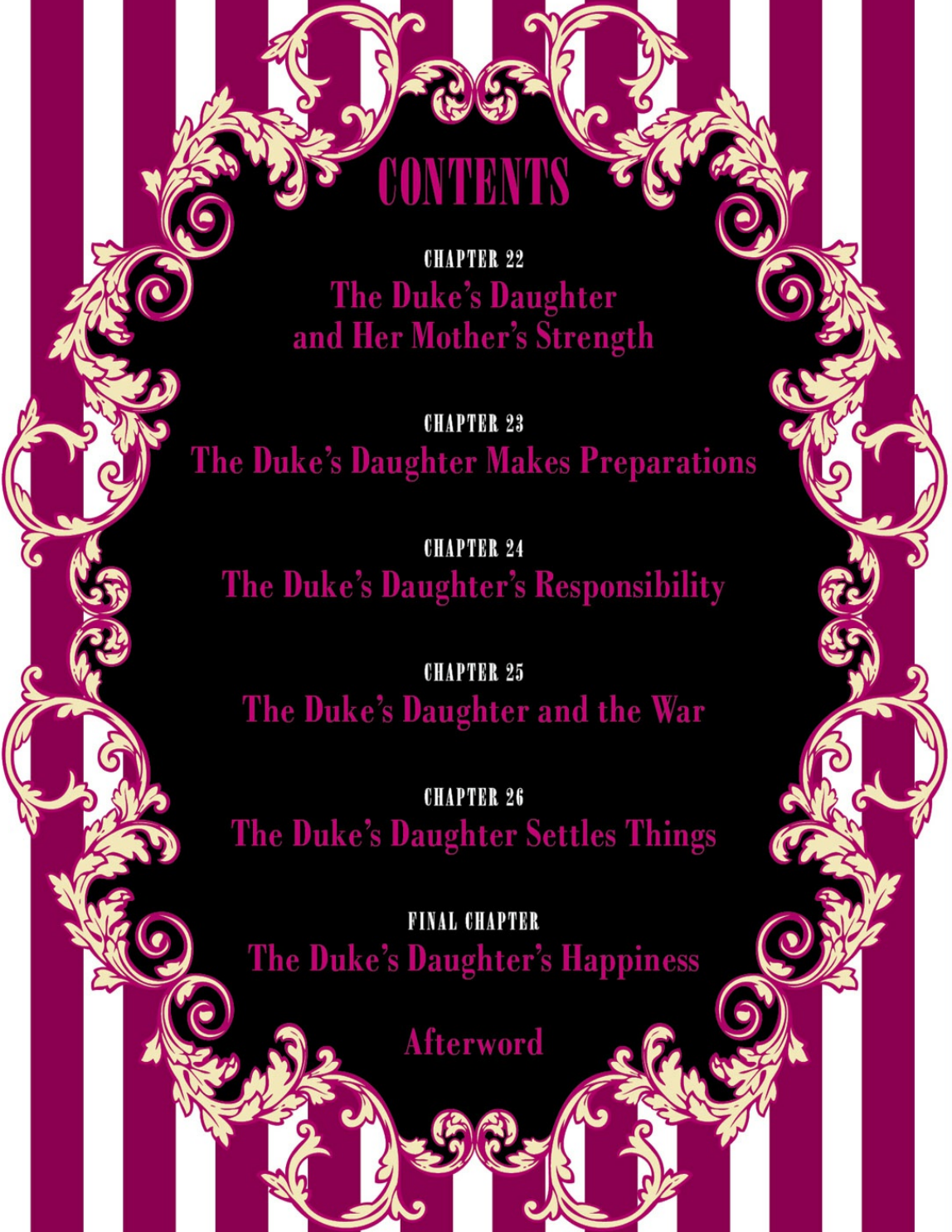
Yuri

Iris

Berne

Edward

Alfred



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Seven Seas Entertainment



BERNE DARSHI ARMELIA

The son of the duke and duchess of Armelia. Works for Alfred.



LOUIS DE ARMELIA

Duke Armelia and prime minister. Iris's father.



RUDIUS GIB ANDERSON

Childhood friend and advisor of the First Prince of Tasmeria, Alfred.



MINA

Takes care of the children at the church orphanage that Iris supports.



EDWARD TONE TASMERIA

Iris's former fiancé. Currently imprisoned for treason.



YURI NEUER

Edward's fiancée. Currently imprisoned for treason.

characters

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE DUKE'S DAUGHTER CAST OF CHARACTERS

MONEDA

Vice-treasurer of Armelia and one of the orphans Iris took in.



GLAUS

Boss of the Boltik Family, who control the eastern region of Armelia.

KREUZ

Lieutenant General of the Tasmerian army



SHREY

Captain of House Anderson's guard.

GAZELL DAZ ANDERSON

Marquis Anderson and general of Tasmeria. Merellis's father.



PAX TESS ANDERSON

The current marquis and head of House Anderson. Merellis's older brother.



DIDA

Iris's bodyguard. She took him in when he was a child.



LYLE

Iris's bodyguard. She took him in when he was a child.



IRIS LANA ARMELIA

Daughter of the Duke of Armelia. Regained memories from a past life.



REHME

House Armelia's librarian. Iris took her in when she was a child.



TANYA

Iris's handmaid. She took her in when she was a child.



ALFRED

The first prince of Tasmeria. He defeated Edward's faction and gained control of the kingdom.



MERELLIS REISER ARMELIA

Duchess Armelia and the Flower of High Society. Iris's mother.



KHADIR

The prince of Acacia who proposed marriage to Iris.



LETICIA

Alfred's younger sister. Very intelligent, has a knack for politics.

KOUSHAKU REIJOU NO TASHINAMI Vol.5

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Chapter 22:

The Duke's Daughter and Her Mother's Strength

WHILE IRIS ATTENDED the meeting of nobles at the capital upon invitation from Queen Ellia, her mother, Merellis, was at House Anderson—the sparring grounds of House Anderson, to be more precise. The Andersons prided themselves in their esteemed reputation as a strong military house, so the sparring grounds in the mansion courtyard rivaled even that of the royal palace. Originally, the space had been used by personal bodyguards of House Anderson to train. Now it was reserved for those lucky few deemed worthy to train with the hero General Gazell.

The most skilled fighters in the kingdom stood there in awe as Merellis practiced—no, actually engaged in a *true duel*—as they watched.

“Hey, did you see the way she just moved?”

“No, it was too fast.”

They were stunned by her fighting prowess, her uncanny swordsmanship. She moved so quickly, it was almost as if she could see the future moves of her opponents before they happened. They fell before her, one after another.

“What *is* she?!” someone cried out as he watched the fights.

Two men heard that—Kreuz, the lieutenant general of the kingdom, and Shrey, the captain of House Anderson's guard—and they exchanged amused glances.

“I don't blame him for being surprised,” Kreuz murmured.

Shrey nodded. “It's unbelievable, isn't it? We know the story, but look. Even people who've seen her train before are frozen.”

“Her intensity is completely new. Before, it was clear she just trained to keep in shape.”

“It makes sense. General Gazell himself recognized her skills. Although you'd never guess it to look at her.”

“True.”

Merellis had a slender frame, so delicate a man might be afraid he'd break her if he held her too tightly. And she was beautiful. Her physical appearance just didn't align with the unabashed fighting spirit she displayed as she wielded her sword.

“Honestly, I'm more shocked that she's General Gazell's daughter, and a noblewoman to boot!”

“Same...” Shrey chuckled wryly and agreed.

The pair had first met Merellis back before she made her debut into high society. She had been training with the guards ever since she was a little girl, under the name “Mer,” telling everyone she was Merellis Reiser Anderson's body double and bodyguard. They learned later that it had been her decision to conceal her identity. Back before her debut, the only people who'd known Merellis's face had been her family and a handful of servants. So of course, when they met Mer, neither Kreuz nor Shrey had any idea who she actually was. Not to mention, the way she'd spoken and carried herself had been a far cry from the proper decorum of a noble girl.

And anyway, what daughter of a noble could train with a fighting spirit that rivaled their own? They only discovered the truth of her identity quite some time after they had all begun training together. In fact, not many people here now knew who she was, including the Anderson family guards, but especially the members of the military. In truth, her identity on these grounds had been kept a closely guarded secret to this day.

It wouldn't have done Merellis's reputation any favors if people found out that the wife of a duke was wielding a sword, but her main priority was hiding her unusual strength.

“She's even better than before.”

“No... I think it's more accurate to say she's just back to where she used to be.”

Even as a child, she had been known for her exceptional prowess. She had tirelessly devoted herself to her training, determined to avenge her mother.

“She said it wasn’t enough.”

“Wasn’t enough?”

“Mm. She said, ‘I’ve been pretending everything is peaceful, but it’s not. Because you never know when someone can threaten your peace.’”

“Ah, she’s talking about the duke,” said Shrey.

Kreuz looked surprised. “You know about that?”

“I got the gist from the marquis.”

“Ah, I see. She feels right terrible about it. She said, ‘When I saw my husband had been attacked, I was so upset, I made a grave mistake. I should have interrogated the culprits to learn who was behind it.’”

“True. It was a regrettable error.”

“You’re being pretty hard on her.”

“If it had been anyone else, I’d be impressed and say, ‘A job well done, protecting the duke!’” said Shrey. “But when I take her strength into consideration, I would expect nothing less from her. After all, she killed the attackers in an instant. But if she had left behind one or two, they certainly would have talked. There’s no way they wouldn’t have been terrified of her, after seeing her fight.”

Kreuz smiled dryly, nodding in agreement.

While they were chatting, the next duel began. Once again, Merellis faced off against several soldiers at once. She fought one mock battle after the other, yet she showed no signs of fatigue. In fact, her movements became sharper with each one.

“It gives me chills just thinking about the way she fought.” Shrey had a faraway look in his eyes as he remembered, like the image had been burned into his mind. He was thinking of the days they’d spent fighting by her side. The ferocity of Merellis’s inner fire gave him goosebumps. She was daring and courageous, inspiring those who followed her in the depths of their souls, pushing them to be like her. And when she was covered in blood, she had an unapproachable aura—a kind of fleeting, heroic beauty.

“Back then, she was just a wild beast. Now she fights like a beast with experience, and that’s far more fearsome. If she keeps this up, she’ll be back to her old self in no time.”

No one here knew her meritorious deeds or just *how* well she could fight. The only ones privy to that information were the very upper echelons of the top brass in Tasmeria: her father, General Gazell, the late former Duke Armelia, and the current Duke Armelia, her husband. A handful of others knew, such as her personal soldiers who’d sworn allegiance to the Anderson family, like Shrey; and Kreuz, who had served as Gazell’s right hand man since Merellis’s time in the field. Not even the queen dowager, who held the true power and influence in the kingdom, knew the entirety of Merellis’s strength and achievements. These accomplishments had either been kept secret or had been credited to the general, never meant to become public.

They would certainly never dare reveal that the daughter of a marquis—the daughter of the general—was a mighty warrior herself. Thus, her true identity had always been shrouded in secrecy.

“Lieutenant General.” A soldier hesitantly approached Kreuz, who flicked his gaze toward him. “Who in the world is that woman? She’s making me lose confidence in my own abilities...” he said weakly.

Shrey burst out laughing. “Don’t worry. Everyone who comes to train here has had to go through this. She’s the ultimate weapon of House Anderson—General Gazell’s number-one student and one of the strongest warriors I know. I won’t say to fight like her, but you’d do well to carefully study how she moves.”

“Y-yes, sir.” The soldier seemed even more bewildered at Kreuz’s serious answer. That made Shrey laugh even harder.

“Shrey.” The subject of their conversation suddenly interrupted them. It seemed Merellis had finished. She had won every match, of course. “I’ve finished up with the soldiers. Next I’d like to take on the members of House Anderson’s guard.”

“H-hang on a second, Merell—I mean, Mer. You’ve been sparring all day! Why don’t you think about taking a break?”

“I’m only doing as much as I used to.” Merellis tipped her head to the side.

She knew that Shrey was well aware of her old regimen.

“That’s true, but...” Shrey glanced around and saw the House Anderson guards take a step backward. They’d trained on these grounds since the start of their service, so they knew just how strong she was. Since she seemed to be even stronger now, it was no wonder that they were apprehensive.

“Oh, Mer! I didn’t realize you were here today.” Luckily, General Gazell happened to appear at the most favorable moment, saving Shrey and Kreuz. Earlier, the general had been obligated to step away for a bit due to business, and Merellis had appeared during his absence. This was the first he’d seen of her today.

“Yes. Thank you for allowing me to do so, General. You’ve trained a number of strong soldiers here.” Merellis answered her father, speaking to him not as his daughter but as “Mer.”

“Good, good. By the way, there’s something I need to talk to you about. Will you come with me?”

“Of course. If you’ll excuse me.”

The pair walked away together, leaving Shrey, Kreuz, and the rest of the soldiers watching after in astonishment.

The moment Merellis entered the general’s private room, she dropped her “Mer” facade and spoke to him as his daughter.

“Are you sure you shouldn’t be back at the mansion today?” her father asked.

“I’d still be worried about Iris. I’m embarrassed to admit that my husband saw how uneasy and restless I was, so he suggested I go move around to clear my head a bit,” Merellis said with a deep sigh.

“That’s just what I’d expect from Louis. He knows you well.”

Training was part of Merellis’s daily routine. She found it much easier to concentrate during it, and it calmed her to have a sword in hand. “He does. It’s just like Louis to tell me that. It reminds me of why I fell in love with him in the first place.”

The general chuckled heartily as his daughter gushed. “How is he feeling, by the way?”

“He’s much better than before.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“I’m sure. But he’s saying he wants to return to work. It’s all I can do to stop him at this point.”

“Is that right? Well, as long as he’s feeling better, what’s wrong with it?”

“True,” she admitted with a sheepish grin.

“Anyway, I’ve got some good news for you. Second Prince Edward, as well as all House Marea and their followers, have been taken into custody.”

For a moment, Merellis froze. Then she let out a deep sigh of relief. “I see... So it’s finally happened. Prince Alfred has claimed victory, at long last.” She smiled softly, a hint of expectation in her voice.

“Mm. We’ve finally acquired the power to ensure the kingdom will stabilize as soon as possible. The next step is resecuring the domains, but at the very least, His Highness has very capable people working for him in the castle. I don’t know the details myself, but according to Louis, most of the recent governing decisions were coming directly from the prince already.”

“That’s what it sounds like. Then Prince Edward and House Marea made such obstacles of themselves... He had to pull a number of strings behind the scenes to remain unnoticed, and it seems there were times when his hands were tied and he couldn’t take the actions he wanted. Now that the tides have turned, I’m certain he’ll have all the power he needs.”

“He needs to succeed as soon as possible to minimize the chaos and confusion. I hope he uses that capable power of his to do so.”

“Have there been any signs of movement from the enemy?”

The general frowned at Merellis’s question. “Has Louis been looking into it?”

“Yes, although he hasn’t told me explicitly. Iris has come to the same conclusion, has she not?”

“Iris... She has a brilliant mind,” the general said. “Almost too brilliant.”

“Doesn’t she? We ought to tell Dida, Lyle, and Tanya that they need to keep an even more of a watchful eye on her. After all, the people who attacked my husband were from that kingdom. We can’t be certain that Iris isn’t in danger.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Call it a hunch. They dressed themselves like bandits, but I could tell they’d been properly trained. They all wielded their blades in the exact same style. That’s just my instinct as someone who’s crossed swords with their compatriots before. And the people standing most stolidly in their masters’ way—and the way of Prince Edward and House Marea—are Prince Alfred, my husband, and perhaps you. Although I can’t say who’s really pulling the strings behind the curtains—our enemies abroad or right at home.”

“I see. Then you’re right, and we need to warn Iris’s bodyguards.”

“Of course. Also, if things get dire, I’m going to fight too.” Merellis said, choosing her words carefully.

The general’s eyes widened. He saw the strength of resolution in her eyes, along with a gleaming fire that he hadn’t seen for some time. He let out a small sigh. “Very well, then. There’s no one you can’t face, after all. I know you can play it by ear if a fight arises. Merry, can I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“Why didn’t you ever teach Iris and Berne how to use a sword?”

Merellis chuckled to herself. “Well, the first reason is because neither of them wanted to. You can’t make progress in something you’re not willing to learn, and you’ll never get truly stronger that way either.” Merellis was very strict when it came to training, but she knew training only worked if a person had the resolve to put themselves through the stringent demands required. “It was partly my selfishness as well.”

The fighting spirit that had burned in her eyes just moments ago vanished, replaced by a sadness. “In the beginning, the reason I picked up the sword was vengeance. The moment I realized that wish wouldn’t come true, I made another wish: that there would never be another who felt the pain I had—the

pain of having someone you protected taken from you, followed by the hatred that drives you thereafter. That was why I continued wielding my blade, coating my hands in blood.

“My children don’t know any of this. They don’t know how it feels to want to take a life or the hatred that comes with it. They have had no reason to know such things; they are the ones who have been building our future. Why should they pick up a sword in times of such peace? Not to mention, as members of House Armelia, they are expected to prioritize their studies. You put all that together, and I imagine that’s why I never asked them to carry a blade.”

“So in other words, you didn’t want them to.”

“Ha ha ha... Yes, I suppose that’s the more concise way of putting it. But as I said, if they had *truly* wanted to learn swordsmanship from the bottom of their hearts, I would have allowed it.”

“I see.”

“But it turns out that even though they haven’t directly bloodied their hands, they’ve ended up responsible for a great many lives, due to their positions.”

“That’s true,” the general agreed with a knowing smile.

“Well, I should be going now. Thank you for informing me of Prince Alfred’s victory—and Iris’s.”

“Certainly. Be careful on your way home.”

“I will.”

With that, Merellis left House Anderson. After a few minutes, the carriage brought her back to the Armelia mansion in the capital.

“Welcome home, Your Grace.” Her servants greeted her as she walked inside. She headed straight to her husband Louis’s room, her footsteps light. She was more pleased than she’d let on regarding Iris’s victory.

“I’m home, darling...” Merellis entered his room but saw he was asleep in bed. She went quiet and walked over to him to sit by his bedside. His complexion looked much healthier than it had before, which naturally elicited a deep sigh of relief.

Louis had always worked too hard. His was such a high-stress, high-demand job that those around him always worried. It was such a precarious thing, like watching someone walk a tightrope strung across a deep chasm. If the rope snapped, or if one little thing made him lose concentration, he would fall into the depths.

Merellis had often been beside herself watching him grow overworked amidst such circumstances. Similarly, several times, she'd been so worried about Iris that all she'd wanted to do was rush to her side and help. She had been unable to. She didn't dare think about leaving her husband's side when he was in such a delicate position, especially of late.

The battle for power within the castle had intensified. Louis worked tirelessly to ensure that the government still ran smoothly, despite all that. Merellis often wanted to tell him to just quit and take care of himself, but she suppressed the urge. It was all for the sake of the kingdom and its citizens. So many of them had suffered due to the floods and the counterfeit gold coins. If not for Louis and his men, as well as Count Sagitalia and Prince Alfred, the kingdom might not have endured.

Many officials had taken the authority that Queen Ellia and Marquis Marea offered and abused their power; a good chunk of the governing positions within the kingdom were now occupied by the corrupt. Most didn't even know the true purpose of their jobs. They did nothing but fill their own pockets and interfere with Louis's work as much as they could. They had been instructed to do so by Queen Ellia and Marquis Marea themselves.

If they let the government stagnate like this, they would only be punishing the citizens. If worse came to worst, sooner or later the kingdom would either end up destroying itself, or it would succumb to an attack levied by another kingdom. It was neither a figure of speech nor an exaggeration to say that the kingdom wouldn't last.

These were the circumstances under which Merellis's husband had been working. She smiled at him, a smile with a hint of sadness. "Iris must have inherited her sense of obligation from you, darling," she murmured.

All of a sudden, he opened his eyes slightly. "You're home, Merry?"

“Oh, I’m sorry! Did I wake you?”

“No... Where’s Iris?” He spoke with concern, his voice hoarse.

“Don’t worry, dear. Prince Alfred secured his victory. That puts House Armelia in a favorable position as well. So in other words, Iris won too.”

“I see... I’m so relieved to hear that.” Louis let out a deep sigh, then closed his eyes once more.

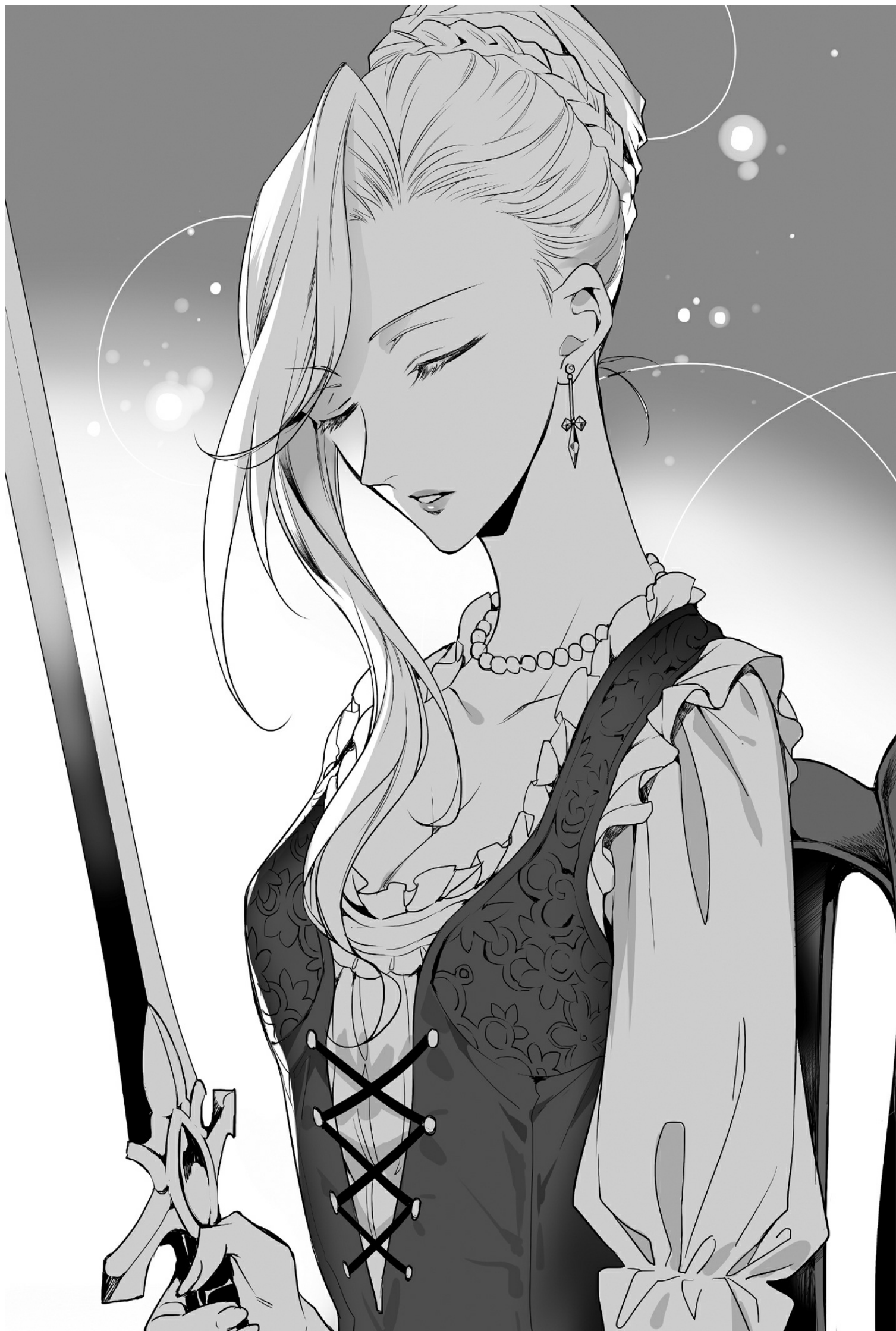
Merellis continued watching him for a while, her heart twisted with worry. When his breaths became deeper and more even and he fell back to sleep, she chuckled to herself and wondered if she worried *too* much. Ever since he’d been injured, every time he closed his eyes, she feared that he would never wake up.

Merellis bent down and kissed Louis on the forehead, then left the room out of a different doorway than the one from which she’d entered. At first glance, it didn’t look like a door at all. It was fashioned to look exactly like part of the wall. If one didn’t know it was there, it would go completely unnoticed. Hidden doors and passageways that led to secret rooms such as this were everywhere in noble mansions. In fact, there were several in this one, as well as in their main house back in Armelia.

The room Merellis was headed to now was so small it could hardly be called a closet. It contained neither ornate furniture nor decorations. A single round table stood in the center of the room, along with a chair. Merellis took a seat in the chair, which was the ordinary wooden sort that one would find anywhere, rather than the lavish, cushioned seats found elsewhere in the mansion. Once she sat down, she reached out and picked up the sword that lay on the table.

It was a plain sword, plain like the room and its sparse furnishings. She drew it from its scabbard. It was well used, but one glance told the observer that it was also well cared for, and that it would be a deadly blade in battle.

Merellis took a deep breath. She leaned her forehead toward the blade and closed her eyes. She was questioning her own resolve, but it looked as if she were praying.



“I had this made especially for you. Will you become a warrior worthy of this sword?”

Every time she came here before this blade, she thought of the words her father had said to her, and she questioned her commitment. Would she be able to keep the vow she had made back then?

Merellis opened her eyes. With that, the oppressive feeling that had weighed on her was gone.

“You told her that?”

General Gazell shrank from his son’s sighs. “No, I didn’t. But you know Merry. She just *knew*.”

“And I know *you*, Father. You just brought it up like it was nothing, didn’t you?” Pax was the current head of House Anderson and the son of General Gazell, who was shrinking back even more. “Well, I know she’s sensitive to the scent of approaching battle. She probably felt it in her bones anyway, so there was really no point in trying to hide it from her...”

“That’s exactly right! So why are you trying to blame me for it?”

“That’s a separate matter. Anyway, I’m not blaming you, Father. You’ve got the same wild instincts when it comes to battle as she does.”

The general wondered what his son was doing if not trying to blame him. “It’s better she found out from me than hearing scraps of information from someone else. Who knows how she would’ve reacted! Ever since she was a young girl, she always rushed to action. Do you have any idea how many stomachaches that gave me?”

“Her personality hasn’t changed much these days.”

“I know. That’s why I thought it would be better if she heard the whole story from me, rather than inaccurate scraps from someone else. Information is a lie, after all. If it gets twisted and you get hold of bad intelligence, it could lead to war. The more accurate information you get, the more your chances of survival increase. Besides, it was for my own peace of mind.”

“I understand. I only fear that she’ll be dragged into the chaos, now that she knows, whether she likes it or not,” Pax said bitterly.

The general inwardly agreed.

Despite Pax’s gentle appearance, his personality was very much like the general’s. Beneath the calm exterior lay a ruthless cold—they would do anything to accomplish their goals. While the general looked every bit the beast his nickname suggested, Pax resembled his late mother. At first glance, you wouldn’t guess what lay beneath. In fact, since he looked so calm and gentle, the truth within became all the more terrifying once it rose to the surface. It did so now because he worried for Merellis; that was clear in his speech and tone.

Pax had always doted on his sister, ever since they were young. A smile crossed the general’s face at the thought.

“By the way, Father, if we go to war with the enemy, will you go into battle?”

“I can’t say at the moment. But...I think it’s very possible. I know the lay of the land, and pardon me for saying it, but I’m our best option for boosting morale. Most of all, taking the state of the kingdom into account... Well, you know.”

“Luckily, the prince has himself quite a following among the soldiers from his time as ‘Dean,’ so he knows the major players. I just hope the confusion is kept to a minimum.”

“True. Will you go to battle?”

“Of course not. You know I’m no good with a sword.”

“Maybe not with a sword. But I’ve never seen a better tactician,” General Gazell said with a laugh. Pax didn’t respond; he just gave his father a tight smile. “Well, no matter. If I do end up having to go into the field, I’ll entrust you with everything back home.”

“Of course.”

“Take care of Merellis too.”

“I doubt she’ll need help from me.”

This time Gazell gave his son a tight smile. “Oh, don’t say that. There can never be enough help when times are rough. There’s no denying her strength,

but that's precisely why she needs soldiers who are loyal to only her. I've trained some of the duke's men, but it remains to be seen whether they'll truly follow her."

"You have a point. Even so, you're an awful soft touch with Merellis, Father."

"You're one to talk. And you're the only one who would ever say that. Shrey and Kreuz compared my parenting to a wild dog pushing his young into a bottomless ravine!"

Pax couldn't help but laugh. "I can't blame them, after seeing how you train your students. Perhaps that's how you show you care, now that she's married into another family."

"Of course it is. No matter what family she married into, it can't change the fact that she's my own flesh and blood. Do you feel differently?"

"No. She's still my beloved little sister, just as she always was."

"I see. Well, at any rate, I'm counting on you."

"Yes, Father."

"You came to train again, eh?" the general said to Merellis with a sardonic smile.

"Yes, I did. I feel like I've recovered my skills, more or less, thanks to everyone here." Several men lay on the ground behind Merellis. She had not a scratch on her—not even a speck of dirt on her clothing. The only sign that she had even fought those men was the sweat that beaded her forehead.

"Miss Mer, may I please be nex—ah, General! Pardon me for the interruption." Soldiers were lining up to spar with her, brimming with enthusiasm. At first her overwhelming strength had frightened them. Now there was no longer any hint of defeat in their eyes. Instead, they looked at her with admiration and respect. This was proof that she had won their trust without having to use her name to do it. Gazell heard that lately, soldiers who Merellis sparred with had been coming to her asking if she would train them. Not only that, but the number of men who wanted to spar with her had

exploded.

He chuckled quietly to himself. He expected nothing less from his daughter.
“Well, that’s good. Just take it easy.”

Just then, one of the elderly servants from the mansion rushed over to Gazell.
“Master, a messenger of Lord Messi has arrived!”

“What? I’ll be right there.”

Merellis watched from nearby with a sharp gaze as the pair spoke.

The general noticed and looked over at her. “You come too.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

The three of them went into the parlor, where Baron Messi’s messenger was sitting on the sofa. He leapt to his feet when the three of them entered the room.

“No, please—make yourself at home. I’m sure you must be tired from your long journey.”

“Thank you, General!”

Gazell sat across from the man, with Merellis standing behind him. The messenger glanced at her with hesitancy and a bit of confusion in his eyes.

“Pardon me, sir, but who is this woman?”

The general dismissed his question with a wave of his hand and said firmly,
“Think nothing of her. Deliver Lord Messi’s message.”

“The kingdom of Tweil has made a move.”

“In a military sense?”

“Yes.”

Neither General Gazell nor Merellis seemed surprised at the news. In fact, they were strangely calm, as if they’d been expecting it. That surprised the servant, because putting the general aside, Merellis looked like a delicate woman. Shouldn’t she be on the verge of fainting due to shock? He had expected as much and therefore pressed the general about the appropriateness

of her presence before he delivered the news.

Yet she wasn't shocked at all; instead she asked him calmly, "How did His Highness react to the news?"

"The baron thinks that perhaps he had already received the information via a different route. My master sent another messenger to deliver the report as well."

"I see. Do we know anything about Twei's plans and the speed at which they're advancing?"

"It's the same marching orders from the last war. We've heard they're moving faster than anticipated. They should reach Tasmeria's border within ten days."

"Mm. I'll go to the castle and prepare for battle immediately. Ah, that's right—bring Lord Messi a message for me. 'Hold down the fort until I get there.'"

"Those are very reassuring words. Thank you." The tension left the messenger's face as he bowed his head.

"Mer."

"Yes!"

"As I said, I'm headed to the castle, and after that, most likely straight to battle."

Merellis silently nodded.

"You don't need to prepare for a fight, but I don't know what will happen. After all, that's the nature of war." Gazell's serious gaze pierced through her, but she didn't falter. In fact, she stared back at him just as fiercely. "Do you remember your vow?"

Merellis's eyes widened slightly, and she smiled. Her vow. It was the vow she had made when the general had given her that sword, the one she kept carefully sharpened and hidden in the Armelia mansion.

"I vow on my name to take pride in the training given to me by my father and those who came before, and in the swordsmanship they have bestowed upon me. I vow to wield my sword with responsibility and to never besmirch that pride."

Merellis had made that vow long ago, but she had never forgotten it.

“Of course. But I keep that sword for a different reason than I did back then.”

“What do you mean?”

“Some things are more important to me than my own pride—the people I love. I would cast aside all honor in order to protect them; I’d even become a demon on the battlefield, if I had to.”

“I see...” The general’s serious expression cracked for a moment, but he regained his composure. “I’ll be leaving now.”

“Godspeed.”

Once the general left, Merellis again returned to the Armelia mansion.

Chapter 23:

The Duke's Daughter Makes Preparations

“TWEIL HAS SENT SOLDIERS across the border. The war has started once again.”

My mother's words made my mind go completely blank. I had to ensure I had heard correctly. “Mother...is that true?” I asked in muted horror.

My mother gave me a wry smile. “I can't blame you for wondering. Unfortunately, it is the truth. An emissary came to Grandfather, alerting him that Tweil has made their move. He's at the castle right now to learn how we intend to respond. Well, not learning—preparing to go to war. The soldiers may well depart tomorrow at the earliest.”

“That quickly?”

“According to the messenger, Tweil is moving faster than expected. The more we delay dispatching our troops, the greater burden we put on Lord Messi. Moreover, if the baron's troops fall, we will be unable to protect our domains to the west. Then Tweil's army will be at the walls of the capital in no time. Time is of the essence. Your grandfather is making that case at this very moment, and he will, even if he has to force their hand.”

“I see...” The world was changing right under my nose. The ripples from those changes would reach this kingdom whether we liked it or not. I started planning my next move. “Will Father stay in the capital?”

“Yes. He must do so as the prime minister, but more importantly, he couldn't withstand a long journey in his condition.”

“Right... Of course.”

“Knowing him, he'll keep himself confined to the castle for a while in order to carry out his duties, even if I try to stop him.” For a moment, my mother glanced down sadly.

“Mother...”

“Well, this is hardly the time to throw myself a pity party. I respect your father because that’s just the kind of man he is.” The sadness on her face vanished, replaced by a spirited smile. “Well? What will you do next, Iris?”

“I’ll stick to my original plan and return to Armelia.”

“Really?” My mother seemed taken aback, her eyes wide.

“If everyone else is staying in the capital, don’t you think it’s better that I go back home? The only thing I can do here is gather information. I can accomplish that much by having Father or Berne send updates to me in Armelia. I had to leave a lot of unfinished business in order to come here, so it’s best I return before this situation causes a commotion there too. There’s more for me to do in the duchy anyway. Besides, if every single person with decision-making power is here in the capital, it’ll create uncertainty and anxiety elsewhere. And I’ll need to prepare for unforeseen circumstances.”

Mother listened to my explanation with a softened expression, but that changed once she spoke. “I see. Well, in that case, Iris...” I’d never seen the expression she made next, a face so serious it was almost frightening. She had been intimidating that time when in her anger she laid into Berne, but for some reason, she was even more terrifying now. “Armelia may be farther from Tveil than we are here, but you never know what will happen in times of war. If you sense any sparks from the fires of war have spread to you, you must let your mother know at once.”

I was baffled by this. Why would I call my mother if war broke out near Armelia? It was true that I had heard from my aunt that my mother was physically formidable, and I felt like Rudy had mentioned something before... but honestly I couldn’t imagine my mother anywhere near a battlefield. I didn’t dare press her further—the intensity of her aura was too much.

“All right. I promise I’ll do so.”

My response seemed to finally dissolve my mother’s tension.

I promptly gave orders to Tanya to get ready to leave the capital and then returned to my room to calm myself for a bit. The time I had feared was finally approaching.

Prince Ed, Marquis Marea, and their faction had been arrested. I had a feeling Dean was already planning his new government. Not all of the people who belonged to his faction were of high social status, but they were extremely capable individuals. It was possible they had set everything up in advance behind the scenes before the arrests played out. However, there wasn't enough time to ensure order was fully restored to the kingdom. Our only saving grace was the fierce loyalty the soldiers felt toward Grandfather, their general. It would be no laughing matter if the soldiers refused to fall in line in the face of an oncoming war. Who knew what would have happened if Ed were still the prince?

There was a knock at the door, then Tanya entered to give me the news. "My lady, the preparations are complete."

"Goodness, that was awfully fast."

"Most of the necessary affairs were already in order."

Ah, that's right. I had planned on leaving directly after the meeting. So much had happened that it completely slipped my mind. "We'll depart for Armelia at once. But first, I want you to call the others here."

Tanya nodded and swiftly left the room to do so. I had a feeling that she sensed what was going on. A few minutes later, Lyle and Dida, who had accompanied us to the capital, entered the room.

"I won't beat around the bush. War with Tweil is imminent." My friends' gazes sharpened. "I will return to Armelia and begin emergency preparations. The situation is progressing faster than I expected."

"Do you think it will affect Armelia as well?"

"Yes, I'm certain of it," I answered without hesitation. The room instantly grew even tenser. That gave me great comfort. "Of course, I'll be praying for my grandfather's complete victory. But nothing will surprise me at this point. Even if we won't be involved in the battle directly, we will certainly see the effects of it. After all, war breeds fear in people's hearts."

The trio nodded.

"That's exactly why I need to be the one commanding the situation and giving

orders back home. I have to be seen as a steady, reliable figure in the midst of chaos. We must get home as soon as possible.”

So, we did just that, taking the fastest route on horseback, which I usually took by carriage. I remembered how difficult and painful the journey had been the last time I rode a horse on this route, when I journeyed to the capital for my excommunication inquiry. It had been far faster to be sure, but at the time, it had sapped my energy. Now I found the unsteady terrain that was jostling me back and forth to be comforting. It’s frightening how adaptable humans can be to change.

“Welcome home, my lady!”

“It’s good to be back, everyone. I’m headed to my study to attend to my duties.”

I kept my remarks to the staff short and sweet, then buried myself in the documents at my desk. Time was limited. I couldn’t waste a single second. A mountain of papers lay before me. I was used to this sight now. Tanya had come to my study with me and didn’t bat an eyelash either. In fact, I’d imagined there would be so many papers in my office that they’d be piled on the floor, so this was a welcome surprise.

This expectation derived from the fact that the situation in Armelia before I left for the capital had been, in a word: horrible. We were swamped with citizens from other domains wanting to immigrate. We’d additionally been put in the impossible situation of sending rations to the capital—or, to be more precise, the impossible situation of Ed.

We’d faced one problem after another. Taking care of those matters was of course urgent, but at the same time, I couldn’t put my regular duties on the back burner either. My officials had been working so tirelessly that people had begun calling my home “the mansion that never sleeps.” Leaving the duchy under these circumstances had been an incredibly difficult decision.

Luckily, I was returning with a victory: I’d managed to unseat Ed and his cronies, which had been the root of the evils we suffered. It was the best possible outcome I could have imagined. As for my plans going forward, I’d put

together a basic outline before I left for the capital, but at this point they were nothing but plans. No matter how much you think through something while you plan, problems *always* arise during execution—that's just the nature of work. Regardless of how much you try to anticipate everything that could possibly go awry, something unexpected always happens.

As such, I had assumed I'd be welcomed home with a mountain of documents, one that might set a personal record in volume, but that wasn't the case. There really was much less than I'd imagined. So much less, in fact, that I was shocked. Of course that was a *good* thing, but still. I was filled with pride thinking of how well Sebastian and our officials had done their jobs—and also at how much they'd grown.

"This is no time to get carried away with emotions," I murmured to no one in particular.

At any rate, I started to organize the documents before me in order of importance. I had the people who were hoping to become Armelian citizens living in temporary housing. The problem each domain had been experiencing with our rations had been more or less solved thanks to Dean buying supplies from the other kingdom, in addition to having recovered the rations from the nobles who were hoarding them. After hearing this news, about twenty percent of the immigrants chose to return to their home domain. The remaining eighty percent still wished to become Armelian citizens. It was my job to get things here in order so that they could live here.

It was important to prepare for the war, but the thing I feared most was violence among the citizens. If the influx of immigrants worsened civil order, I would have no time to prepare for aggression from abroad. Thus I needed to arrange for proper living circumstances for the immigrants, and also show the citizens I was steady and dependable.

In order to do that, I needed to draw up family registers for the new citizens, as well as secure them employment and housing. The housing could wait a bit, but ultimately the places they were living now were nothing more than temporary. The structures had been constructed in a hurry and so were improvised and not made to last more than two years. As for their employment, luckily the economy in Armelia was still booming. Many industries were in need

of more workers, so I was confident I would be able to arrange jobs for the new citizens in no time.

I read through the documents. The appropriate officials were taking surveys of the immigrants as to their family structure, their employment background, and their reasons for wanting to live in Armelia. Their reasons for the last were largely the same. The most interesting thing I found was actually regarding their careers.

For example, one was skilled at weaving a particular kind of textile. Another specialized in making handicrafts fashioned out of gold. Many of these immigrants were skilled in their home domains' special trades or crafts. Others worked in the medical field or owned large businesses. They were talented people. There was no greater reward for my hard work than being able to welcome such gifted individuals as citizens of Armelia.

It felt like a long time ago now, but it made me think about giving that speech at the merchant guild when I wanted to build the academy.

"I want to open it as soon as possible. The people of this duchy are a vital, precious resource to my family. It would be such a waste to not polish them until they shine."

I'd believed this when I said it to the leaders of the guild, and my thoughts on the matter hadn't changed. Talented people are valuable assets. They contain a multitude of possibilities for the future. Once you gather enough of those talented people, they form organized groups, and eventually they grow to establish domains that become kingdoms... In other words, as my citizens grew, so too did the duchy grow in power and wealth. That wealth returned profits in droves. Those were my thoughts on the matter, anyway.

Consequently, I viewed my job as the acting governor to be someone who protected and nurtured such people. Now I had a line of such folk who wanted to become citizens of my domain. I could take the ones skilled at textiles and have them work in the clothing business; they could use their expertise in weaving traditions to develop other special skills and processes that would originate here in Armelia. I was certain all this would lead to highly interesting products.

In other words, if I could combine the talented people who were already living and working in Armelia with these new transplants, I had a feeling it would incite an explosion of new ideas and products. Just thinking about it made me tremble with excitement.

But I digress. The issue wasn't how interesting or lovely I found the idea of new citizens coming to Armelia but instead how horrible the conditions of their home domains must have been for these incredibly skilled people to want to move somewhere else.

Berne had recently been to another domain and said to Mother and Father: "I saw hell on earth." I could only imagine how things must have been. The food shortages were coming to an end thanks to the guidance and initiative of Dean and Berne. Yet the rift that had been torn between the ordinary citizens and the aristocratic class was deep indeed. This incident had exposed the nobility as selfish individuals who acted inconsiderately; I was sure the average citizens had grown angry, disillusioned, and given up on their support. Proof of that lay in these talented workers, who were irreplaceable and should have been well taken care of so that they would stay local. Instead, they wanted to move here in droves. That went to show just how terribly this kingdom's nobility had forgotten their purpose and responsibilities and become driven by their own greed.

"Having pride in being born to a great lineage doesn't make one a noble. True nobles are defined by their actions." My grandfather had told me that over and over again since I was young. Of course at the time, it went in one ear and out the other, but now the truth of his sentiment was almost painful.

Nobles were given power to act as leaders among citizens, to listen to and collect their opinions, and if necessary, act as a shield to protect them. As someone who had such a responsibility to protect my citizens, I found this situation incredibly unfortunate. I understood why Dean was breaking down the existing system in order to create a unified kingdom. Over the course of Tasmeria's long history, it seemed that the Darryl Church wasn't the only thing that had led us to lose sight of our *raison d'être*. At some point, the nobles began to leverage their power and influence for their own benefits and forgot the reason they had been given that power in the first place. This incident had

definitely brought all of that to light. Fortunately, a great deal of those nobles had been arrested.

“Excuse me, my lady. I have news for you.” An official from Abitante knocked and entered the room, interrupting my reverie. I quickly changed gears to focus on him.

“I’m so sorry to have interrupted your work by asking you to come here. I know you’re busy. I’d like to hear how things are going at the immigration point. First, tell me how the census is progressing.”

“It’s about eighty percent complete.”

“I see. How about the job counseling?”

“We assessed the participants’ preferences and matched them with suitable jobs in their fields and interests as best we could. We’re conducting the matching at the same time as the census, so it’s also eighty percent complete. They’re all eager to start their new lives, so they’re filled with ambition.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

We weren’t giving them charity; instead we were setting them up with resources to become self-sufficient so that they could feel at home in Armelia. Hearing that they felt hungry for success was the best news I could receive.

“There aren’t any problems, then? I want you to continue your work and ensure that you give each individual adequate attention.”

“Of course. The situation has vastly improved and we’re no longer short-staffed, so we were planning to tackle the housing issue. What do you think? We have the temporary housing, so we hadn’t done much about it while we were prioritizing securing jobs. Only those who had money on hand were able to buy where they wanted.”

“Yes, we definitely need to secure their employment before worrying about housing...”

Climate and terrain differed in the various regions of Armelia. At the port to the east, the economy centered on the fishing industry, but lately it was shifting to foreign trade. Conversely, to the west, our more mountainous region

contained the forestry industry, though lately we'd been putting effort to make it more of a tourist destination with hot spring resorts. Therefore, the ideal location for each individual to call their home depended greatly on their trade. Thus, the best strategy was to secure employment for them first; housing would come later.

"How many wanted to buy homes with their own funds?"

"More than ten percent, perhaps? Certainly less than twenty."

"Oh, that's more than I expected!" To put it bluntly, the people who could afford to buy housing on their own had to be wealthy if they had the means to front that much in liquid assets during a natural disaster. If they had those means, they also had to be quite dissatisfied with the state of affairs in their prior domains to want to move somewhere else. Of course, they would still say their motive was to escape the tumult of the natural disaster.

"And you've been holding meetings introducing our new citizens to the duchy?" The meetings I referred to were basically an orientation to life in Armelia. It was a time to explain our policies and systems, as well as the characteristics of each domain.

"Yes, especially as our duchy differs from other domains in quite a number of ways, even though it's second nature to us now."

He was right. For example: our paper currency, banking system, education system, and tax systems were entirely different from our neighbors'. Many of our policies also vastly differed from those in other domains, so I was sure the new citizens would be both surprised and confused. These changes had been introduced to our citizens gradually, so they'd had time to get used to each one. If they had been implemented all at once, certainly my people would have been just as bewildered as their new neighbors. Of course, that never would have happened, as at the time I hadn't had the staff necessary to simultaneously deploy all those reforms.

"Well, if you're explaining it all, then they should understand the major differences between our regions. In that case, all that's left to do is meet with them individually, and they can use their own funds to buy housing. After that, there's not much we can do on our end. Ah, that reminds me—what are we

doing about aid when it comes to food?”

“We’ve already distributed food, and from now on, further supplies will be coordinated by Agriculture.”

Agriculture was a new branch of government I’d established right before I went to the capital. I’d taken officials from Borsa, Abitante, and Architetto, along with people who had achieved highest marks in the agriculture program at the academy of higher education. As its name suggested, this branch focused on overseeing our food resources. More specifically, not only did they manage our stockpiled rations, they also predicted the output of each different crop—and if they predicted any shortages, they allocated aid to the specific domain as needed. I’d devised this system after Ed’s harassment campaign, when he forced me to send our rations to the capital. Now I understood more than ever how essential this branch would be.

“I see... I’ll go ahead and follow up with Agriculture about this later. There’s something else I need them to take care of...”

“I thought you’d say that, Lady Iris, so I took it upon myself to send word to them. They should be here soon.”

I was inwardly impressed. The officials truly had grown so much, including this fellow. He had anticipated my reaction and acted accordingly. I was most pleased with this growth, and at the same time grateful that we had come this far together. I’d put them through many struggles since becoming the acting governor. In order to revolutionize our government, what I’d sought from them wasn’t the mechanical performance of their duties but actual ingenuity. I needed them to think outside the box and act on new ideas to produce the most favorable results. That was incredibly difficult. It was blazing a path through an unexplored wilderness. I had prayed that although they were searching through the darkness, they would keep going no matter what. They had. Now, just when I thought we had made progress, I would have to bring them another catastrophe.

Of course it wasn’t like I *wanted* to be at the center of a catastrophe at all times. The ripples of disaster affected Armelia regardless of what I did and thus I had to deal with them, usually with only a handful of people striving to

produce favorable outcomes. If I were my employee, I would've thrown in the towel long ago. But these people had stuck with me, and now they were seasoned veterans. I could proudly say that not one bureaucrat in the capital was more talented. I really didn't deserve them.

"...My lady?" The official looked at me with concern.

I shook my head with a smile. "Lastly, I want you to pay close attention to any possible strife between the citizens and the immigrants. I've read the reports from the garrison, of course, but it's always best to have more eyes."

With all the confusion inherent to the current situation, it wouldn't surprise if quarrels broke out here and there.

"I haven't noticed anything of that nature," he said. "On the contrary, it seems our citizens are actively welcoming the new transplants."

"Goodness!" Honestly, that surprised me.

I'd resigned myself to the likelihood of discord between the two groups. After all, humans can be shockingly cruel. When people are suffering, others may hesitate to lend a helping hand because they fear the sparks of trouble will land on them and ignite their own lives. If some greater trouble inexorably approaches through a surplus of victims, it can even lead people seeking help to be treated as objects of fear and revulsion. I nursed real anxiety over this.

The official said, "Pardon my candor, my lady, but had our citizens been suffering the strains of poverty or other duress, as the people have in other domains, I'm not sure what would have happened. Instead, our citizens know that when they wake up, they can count on three meals a day and a stable government. Most of all, they trust you with the duchy."

"Well then, I'll have to work hard to live up to their expectations," I said with a wry smile.

Just then, Moneda knocked at the door and entered. His complexion was pale, even for him. I was sure I looked the same way. To be honest, I hadn't wanted to see Moneda, because I didn't want to face the discussions we needed to have. I might compare it to dreading going to school on the day of a big test. But there was no time to put off a discussion simply because I didn't

want to. Rather, it was time for both of us to gain another wrinkle on our faces.

“Would you like me to leave, my lady?” the Abitante official asked.

I shook my head. I wanted him present for this discussion.

“It’s been a long time since we last met, my lady,” said Moneda.

“Yes, it has.”

We exchanged a tired laugh.

“I heard that the first prince secured victory in the capital,” he said. “I’m pleased to know this means the harassment Armelia has endured will finally come to an end.”

“Yes, quite. The information you provided assisted greatly in that matter, Moneda. Forgive me for being so late in expressing my gratitude. Thank you so much.”

“There’s no need to thank me. Regarding that matter, back when I was in the merchant guild...”

“Moneda,” I said. He jolted slightly. “You were in the merchant guild, remember? So, it’s not like you to dwell on things. Money over time, right?”

The moment I said that, the look in his eyes changed to one of resolve. Resolve to keep moving forward despite the burden on his shoulders.

“I’d like to discuss things moving forward,” I said.

“I’m sure you do. This is the perfect time.”

While we spoke, various officials from other branches whom the Abitante official had invited assembled in the room.

“Well, now that everyone’s here, let’s start the meeting in the room next door.”

We went to the other room and took our seats. Once we did, the official from Agriculture handed out documents that everyone looked over.

“This is the predicted output for our stockpiles and harvests across the duchy.”

We'd recovered a great deal of our stockpiles, compared to when we'd been down to the reserves I had hidden off the books. That was fairly impressive, considering we were providing food aid to the new citizens. Taking the hit to our budget in order to import more supplies from other kingdoms had certainly been worth it. As long as nothing else happened, we would completely recover our stores. The key phrase there being "as long as *nothing else* happened."

Ahh, my head is killing me.

"It seems we're predicting big numbers for the next harvest," I noted. The documents suggested this year's harvest would be nearly double that of the previous year.

"Our research at the academy has borne fruit. Not only did we begin cultivating new varieties of our crops, but we've discovered ways to more efficiently use our farmland and optimize cultivation to maximize yield. Those numbers are solid, barring some manner of large-scale disaster that impacts the farmlands before harvest time."

"Lady Iris, I have a report from Architetto. The construction for the flood prevention measures is nearly finished. All the most important structures are completed, and only smaller projects remain. Therefore, we're at the point where the structures can be considered functional. As long as we don't experience another catastrophic hundred-year storm, our construction should prevent large-scale casualties in future floods."

I let out a noise of satisfaction. "That finished ahead of schedule, no? Especially since we were experimenting with all those innovations on my grandfather's original plans."

"You're not wrong. But this time we had direct cooperation from the citizens. That's the main element driving our rapid progress."

"I see..."

It seemed we were headed in such a good direction because the citizens had laid the groundwork for us. Informing them of why the measures were necessary and what we were doing to make it possible—as well as the reasoning behind the project—was a vital step in convincing them to accept the disturbance to their daily lives.

“What about the aqueduct and reservoir projects we initiated concurrently?”

“Those are about halfway completed. The reservoir is already operational, but the aqueducts are not. Once the flood prevention projects are completed, we can transition those workers to the aqueducts. That will speed up progress.”

“I see...”

“Given this report from Architetto, it sounds like we’ve greatly reduced the risk of damage from flooding. I don’t think it will be a problem to continue distributing food aid. What do you think, Lady Iris?”

I thought through it before I gave an answer. I considered the situation as it stood, as well as what we would have to do moving forward. “Let me confirm your reports one more time. You’ve recommended jobs for eighty percent of the hopeful citizens and have distributed rations to them, correct?”

The officials from Abitante and Agriculture both nodded.

“In that case, I want you to discontinue food assistance to them.”

My statement seemed to shock everyone in the room; their eyes widened in unison. It was certainly possible to continue providing the new citizens with food, considering the current state of our stockpiles. But again, that was under the assumption that *nothing else would happen*. I watched as one after another, the officials realized the rationale behind my statement, and they continued to listen with solemn expressions.

“There has not yet been an official announcement, but: we will soon be at war.”

Everyone in the room gasped, except for Moneda. Before I left the capital, I’d sent urgent word to him, informing him of the situation, so he was aware. He still looked quite pale hearing it said aloud, however. I completely understood.

“With Tweil?” one of the officials found the determination to ask. I could tell that they already knew the answer, but they had to hear it for confirmation.

I nodded. All of them looked like they wanted to say something, but none spoke. I was sure curse words were streaming through their heads. Their expressions were about ninety percent anger and ten percent relief.

They were no doubt angry as citizens that once again our kingdom would have to resort to using military force. Moreover, I'm sure that as government officials, they were furious that just as they were finally nearing an end to their previous troubles, yet another catastrophe had popped up.

The only saving grace in this situation was the great distance between Tweil and Armelia.

"So, with that in mind, we need to discuss our actions going forward," I said deliberately, at which everyone sat up a bit straighter. The room went completely silent for a moment. "Moneda, how are things at the merchant guild?"

"It doesn't seem like they have this information yet, so the markets are stable."

"Good. I want you to keep a close eye on them to make sure that no one's buying up too much food and medicine in the name of hoarding."

"And we'll continue the anti-profiteering ordinance?" a Codice official asked.

The anti-profiteering ordinance in question had been devised to punish individuals who bought up goods or held off on selling them in order to drive up prices with the goal of excessive profits. There was a similar law in Japan, from what I could recall. I'd studied it a bit in history class, though I didn't know the finer details. At any rate, we shared the same goals in Armelia. During natural disasters, demand exceeds supply. Unfortunately, some people will always want to take advantage of that by buying up already scarce goods and restricting their sales or driving up prices in order to better profit.

Now we faced war. The kingdom had to secure rations to feed the soldiers heading to battle, and if the war spread to the point that it affected farmland, it would also negatively impact the harvest. Even if we were able to balance supply and demand within our domain, if the kingdom as a whole couldn't keep up with need, then it would be only natural for people to consider buying supplies from domains with cheaper prices, then selling them at a markup in domains where those supplies were scarce. My goal was to have an open market, so the need to address these inevitable behaviors troubled me, but I was responsible for the duchy.

More than anything, I wanted to avoid a situation wherein food was diverted outside of Armelia. After all, once word got out about the war, it was impossible to know how many of our citizens would rush to the markets to buy supplies in a blind panic.

“Yes, of course,” I said. “We will also preserve the status quo with tariffs.” Since we’d feared seeing food and supplies being exported out from Armelia, we currently had extra high tariffs on exports of several types of related items, though import taxes remained unchanged.

“Do you want to tax the same categories as before?”

“Yes, food and medicine. Check with Borsa and Agriculture later and draw up a list. After that, get the necessary paperwork in order. Moneda, what are the value trends in those markets?”

“The prices have begun to rise slightly, but consumption remains the same. Therefore, I believe it’s increasing regardless of actual supply.”

“Let’s ensure we’re regulating the flow of goods within those markets, though I suspect the inflation is driven by people’s subconscious anxieties.”

“In order to lower the price again, we’ll need an ample supply. Or should we reduce the amount of money in circulation?”

“If I may speak from Borsa’s perspective, I’d like to hold off procuring food from other kingdoms. If we keep spending large sums of money on that objective, we won’t have enough liquid assets to put toward other necessary expenses.”

Moneda and I paled at the Borsa official’s highly insightful point.

“I realize this is out of my field, but if I may say something...” an official from Agriculture spoke up. “Long ago, the kingdom borrowed money from citizens. What if we tried that again? We could use those funds to buy supplies and rebuild our stockpiles. By gathering currency from the citizens, we would also cut down on the amount of money in circulation.”

“Ah, you mean bonds,” I said. I appreciated his alternative plan, though I couldn’t get on board. “That’s difficult for me to agree with. First of all, we’re limited in the amount of currency we can produce given our gold standard.”

Our paper currency system was composed of gold-convertible banknotes—that is, the value of a given piece of paper relied on there being an equivalent amount of gold you could exchange it for. That meant the amount of paper currency we could issue was limited by the number of gold coins in our vaults. Lacking capital didn't mean we could simply issue paper currency to make up the difference. Whether you have a gold standard or a fiat system, issuing bonds dims a government's financial outlook, because it only increases debt in the long run.

"Secondly, we can't guarantee that people will buy our bonds. The cost of living is rising, and interest rates are climbing in order to curb them. Thirdly, in order to maintain a healthy financial ecosystem, we need a healthy foundation for our future finances. In the end, bonds are nothing more than promissory notes. Thus, we would have an obligation to repay them in the future. In other words, it's a guarantee that we'll have those funds in the future—but if we don't have our affairs in order, our debt will only snowball. For those reasons, I cannot agree to issuing bonds."

"It's like an extraordinarily potent medicine—you should only take it if it's absolutely necessary. Is that accurate?"

"There's a non-zero chance that the sparks of war will spread even to our duchy. For that reason, we need to secure all the funds we possibly can."

"Isn't that Borsa's responsibility? Instead of putting our hopes in new sources of capital, shouldn't we cut expenditures from other areas in order to prepare for the war?"

"I'm worried about the citizens' reactions. Anxiety is contagious, and it can incite unexpected behavior. This all increases the likelihood that they'll hoard food."

"Shouldn't we just expect Codice to deal with that?"

I was pleased to hear such a passionate discussion. Once everyone stated their opinions, we were able to debate. I couldn't possibly have done it all alone. We met for several days and nights to continue the discussion, and after all our impassioned debate led us to the point of total exhaustion, we finally settled on a plan.

A week later, the kingdom publicly announced that we were at war. At first, there was a bit of panic in Armelia, but gradually things calmed down. Either the meetings during which we'd worried ourselves sick—to the point that I was sure we all had permanent wrinkles between our brows—had been successful, or the people had a less acute sense of danger in the face of impending crisis than I'd thought.

Nevertheless, I was pleased that things in the city seemed to be business as usual, even if they only appeared to be on the surface.

I reached for my coffee cup. At present, I enjoyed coffee as a simple indulgence, but I'd soon be relying on the caffeine to keep me awake. I tried to avoid that as much as possible, since it wasn't healthy, and the more I drank, the less effective it became. I smiled tiredly at the thought, then opened the letter from my mother that had just arrived. It contained everything she knew about the current situation.

First, she told me of the military's affairs. Grandfather had been officially named supreme commander in the war against Tweil and was headed to the front line. She reported the scale of the advancing troops and detailed information regarding their plans. I was thoroughly in awe of my mother for being able to gather so much information as the wife of a noble, even taking into consideration that she was from House Anderson. I gratefully read the entirety. Who knew when it would come in handy?

Next, she described the goings-on in our family, as well as those at the castle. As I had seen at the last meeting there, Berne was still working himself to the bone as Dean's close aide. Even though he was my own brother, I had to admit that when I saw the look in his eyes and the way he carried himself when he stepped up to the dais, a chill had run through me. I had felt such resolve coming from him. If he kept up that energy, I knew he would overcome any challenge.

Mother also wrote of the nobility's activities. Some had decided to stay in the capital, but the ones who were governors of their own domains had returned to their estates to prepare for war. Ed was no longer around to indulge those who used their power as they pleased, so if anyone were to neglect their domains now, they would no doubt be immediately removed from their posts. Dean was

extremely strict when it came to people doing their jobs, but Berne especially wouldn't tolerate shirked duties under any circumstance.

Finally, she told me of events in the capital. There had been no outbreaks of violence, but the citizens seemed troubled by the sudden arrival of yet more turbulence. As one of my officials had said in that meeting the other day, anxiety was contagious. Mob mentality meant that once a spark lit, it wouldn't be long until the fire spread. We were walking on thin ice.

"I wanted her to write more about the war itself, but I suppose that would be difficult."

"If you wish, I can gather whatever information you need right away, my lady," said Tanya.

I couldn't hide my surprise. At first, I thought, *"Surely, not even Tanya could get that information..."* Then it dawned on me that perhaps she very well *could*. What I wanted was military intelligence. I wasn't sure how difficult it would be to obtain classified information, but I could certainly guess.

"Could you do that?" I asked.

"If you wish. We have several people positioned inside the castle. Certainly not even they are privy to the detailed actions of the military, but if you desire, I can have one of them sent to either Lord Messi's or the former Lord Monroe's domains. We have the connections, so with enough time I'm confident we can obtain that information."

Tanya said this so casually that I was quietly astonished. Her talent never ceased to amaze me. I had wondered several times what her limits truly were. But I had to admit I had never been so shocked by her skills as I was that day.

"In that case, I'd like to ask you to do just that," I said. "Please gather that intel as soon as you possibly can."

"Very well, my lady. I'll send the orders right away."

After Tanya left the room, I burned the letter and once again immersed myself in work.

“Gramps, I’ve got good news for you: the war has begun,” Khadir, the prince of Acacia, informed Hafiz with a smile.

“Aha, so Tweil has finally made its move? I was wondering when it would happen. They certainly took their time, didn’t they?”

“Tweil isn’t as unified as one might think. Some people there are firmly convinced they can avenge their prior defeat and seize the resources they desire by invading Tasmeria. At the same time, some want to prioritize enriching the kingdom from within instead of racking up war expenditures. They have the same goals and know they have to make sacrifices, but they differ in *what* they think they ought to sacrifice.”

“Ha ha... They seem awfully confident for a kingdom whose people aren’t on the same page about going to war!”

“Precisely. The most important thing is that Tweil made a move, period. I’m sure Father will be notified in the next few days. Then I’m certain he will dispatch my diligent older brother and the general’s faction.” Khadir took the cup Hafiz offered him and sipped from it. “Just thinking about how we’ll soon be rid of those no-good nuisances fills me with relief.”

“Your Highness, forgive your old grandpa for saying this, but will they really do that well? Honestly, I can’t even picture them on the front line.”

“That’s where they want to be. The draw is the duchy of Armelia. I’ve been spreading rumors for quite some time now that Father’s absolutely obsessed with Armelia, and whoever gets them to surrender will receive a handsome reward. Father’s wanted more land under his control for some time now, and he’s incredibly impressed with Armelia’s production. So I based my rumors on facts, you see?”

“That’s true.”

“Besides, information about Armelia travels fast around here. It seems one thing greedy people have in common is the desire to conquer fertile land.”

“I see. You imagine they’re thinking ‘if we conquer that bountiful domain, we might be granted the right to govern it!’”

“Exactly. Although I doubt they’ll be able to do so in the first place. It doesn’t

matter, though. Their absence will give me the perfect opportunity to remove Father from the throne and take it for myself.”

“Your Highness, please be careful. I checked beforehand to make sure we were alone, but you know the walls have ears inside the royal palace. You can never be too careful!”

“You’re right. But if you checked, then we’re safe.” A soft smile spread across Hafiz’s face. “My father is so terribly greedy, and all my brother can think of is following in his footsteps. The general has shown his greed as well by engaging in this ostentatious show of power and flaunting his authority to Acacia’s upper class. Everywhere you look, it’s greed, greed, greed! No wonder we’re seeing signs of rising smoke all across the kingdom. It won’t be long until we’re in the same situation as Tweil and Tasmeria, and no one will be laughing then.”

The kingdom of Acacia prided itself in its vast territory, which was lush and fertile, rich with resources. Unlike Tasmeria, there were no separate domains ruled by their own governors; the royal family directly controlled the whole kingdom. In other words, their king possessed overwhelmingly more power than Tasmeria’s. Acacia was incredibly blessed when their king was wise, but when a foolish king inherited the throne, they swerved onto the road toward disaster.

“Long ago, Father was the kind of king our people desired. That much is clear when you look at his policies in our records. However, over time, perhaps because he folded to the pressure, he surrounded himself with yes-men and only listened to those who agreed with him. I’m certain this is the reason we’re seeing these signs of conflagration rise.”

“Perhaps it’s the same for all kingdoms that grow too large and are blessed with too many fruits—they rot from the inside out.”

“Hmm.”

“That’s what makes you the symbol of our hope, Your Highness. Please take care of yourself.”

“We’re back on that again?”

“Yes. How absolutely devastating would it be if you suffered some sort of

downfall during this crucial time?”

“I’m no match for you, Gramps.”

Hafiz bowed his head at the compliment. “By the way, I heard that the elusive first prince Alfred finally made his appearance.”

“That’s right. I thought the second prince would continue mucking things up for a bit longer, but I suppose it was a predictable outcome. And after hiring private guards and spies to make sure the second prince and his cronies didn’t die too soon...”

“That just goes to show how formidable the first prince is.”

“After this is over, I’d like to meet him.” Khadir put his cup on the side table and Hafiz poured some coffee into it, the fragrant aroma filling the room.

“Still, I don’t understand,” said Hafiz. “Just the other day, when we left Armelia, you said you weren’t sure where things would land with them.”

“If Tweil defeats Tasmeria, I’m not sure Armelia could withstand taking on two kingdoms at once. But it doesn’t matter. Honestly, I don’t care who wins this war. I only care about the people who stand in the way of my dreams. I’ll do to them what I do to everyone who dares to imperil Acacia’s future.” Khadir wore a pleasant, easy smile. “The longer they’re away, the smoother things will go in my pursuit of the throne.”

“But if you lose, won’t this come to quite the financial loss?”

“Not at all. We’ll ensure the ‘invaders’ take responsibility for any losses. They’re so greedy, I’m sure they have a great deal of money saved up.”

“Is that so?”

“The only real question is how quickly they’ll be defeated. It would be quite troublesome if things were settled too swiftly and the survivors came home too soon. So I devised a little plot for them.”

“Ohh, is that right? My goodness, Your Highness...” Hafiz chuckled.

“What is it, Gramps?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing. I was just imagining Lady Iris’s future hardships.”

“What are you talking about? My precious future wife isn’t so delicate that she’d let something like that destroy her.”

For a moment, Hafiz looked astonished. “You consider her precious?” It was only natural for him to question this. After all, who would purposefully place someone they thought precious in a predicament such as this?

“Why else would I ask her to marry me? Don’t tell me you think that was a joke?”

“No, no. But I assumed you made the proposal for political reasons.”

“You think it was political, eh? Hmm, well, I admit that was part of it. But if my aim were solely political, I have plenty of other prospects. I wouldn’t have gone to all the trouble of crossing the sea to ask the daughter of a foreign duke to marry me.”

“I suppose I see your point. Pardon me for being forward, Your Highness, but what is it about Lady Iris that you find so attractive?”

After all, Khadir had only met the girl once, when he had traveled to Armelia in disguise, taking his grandfather’s name to hide his identity. After that, he had seen her from afar several times when he’d traveled to Tasmeria while concealing himself with merchants conducting surveillance. “After we began to increase our trade with Armelia, I did some research on the place. I learned of her at that time. At first, I thought the tales of her accomplishments were some kind of long joke or that they were blown out of proportion. But when I went to the duchy and saw her for myself, well... She’s a rare one indeed. She’s intelligent, compassionate... Precisely the kind of woman worthy to stand by a king’s side. Not only that, she’s beautiful. It’s only natural that I’d want her.”

“I see...”

“By the way, Gramps, Armelia is independently manufacturing silk.”

“What did you say?!” Hafiz’s mouth hung open, which he rarely allowed in front of the prince. He was wholly shocked. “The production method is top secret! How in the world did she learn it?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know if she discovered it herself, if she got the information from someone, or if one of her talented agents discovered our

secret. But regardless of how she obtained the information, it's proof of how talented her people are. In other words, she's so impressive that people of such skill are eager to work for her."

"I see, I see. I suppose I should revisit my opinion of her."

Prince Khadir seemed pleased by that and took another drink. "I was only with her for a short time, but that was enough to confirm that the stories about her are true. They are not the least bit exaggerated."

"I see. Shouldn't that make you think even more carefully?"

"Have you forgotten that things are already in motion? Even if I had opposed the proposition Tweil brought to us, Father wouldn't have stopped them. There's nothing I can do about their actions, and even if there was, there's no time. As I said, she's not the type of woman who will be defeated by a bumpy road. The only thing I regret is that I can't watch those strong, willful eyes cloud over firsthand."

Hafiz's face tightened for a moment, but then his soft smile returned as if nothing had happened. "Well, in that case, I wish Tasmeria nothing but the best. Just as you said—no matter how valiantly Lady Iris fights alone, if the kingdom of Tasmeria loses, it will be extremely difficult to make her your queen as the noble of a defeated kingdom."

"True..."

"By the way, Your Highness...you mentioned you devised a little plot? What exactly is it?"

"Hm? Oh, just something I recycled."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Do you remember a long time ago when that vixen from Tweil tried to get her paws on Armelia?" Khadir asked with a pleasant smile. "Well, I thought it would be a shame not to recycle the scraps left behind by that plan. All I had to do was knock her head about to confuse her a bit, and now even those blockheads will fight her."

Chapter 24:

The Duke's Daughter's Responsibility

I SAT BY THE WINDOW under the moonlight. The view from that spot looked so different in the pale light versus in the bright sunshine. It took on a new beauty. Everything was quiet, so quiet it was hard to believe that somewhere in this same kingdom, a war was raging, even though it was far away.

All of a sudden, I turned my gaze to the flowerpot next to me. The bugles I'd planted were blossoming wonderfully.

"Oh, how darling! Ma'am! What kind of flower is this?"

I smiled as I wondered how many months had passed since I asked the lady at the market that question and bought those seeds. So much had happened since then. Many seasons had passed, and the bag of seeds I'd bought that day had grown into these beautiful flowers, which had then dropped seeds and grown into flowers themselves. How many generations past those original seeds were the flowers I now looked at? I reached out to gently caress the soft, delicate petals. Despite the darkness (or perhaps because of it?) they looked even more beautiful than usual in the moonlight.

"I just wish..."

I suddenly recalled his voice. What had the look on his face been behind the gale of flower petals that day? What had he wanted to say, but didn't? I looked at the open book in my lap, thinking there was no use in wondering now. Just then, there was a knock at the door.

"Excuse me, my lady... My lady?" Tanya entered and gave me a suspicious look. "Why are you sitting over there?"

"I was taking a break and wanted to look out at the view for a bit." I knew her worried expression probably wouldn't improve if I kept sitting there, so I got up and sat at my desk. She looked at the book I was holding, and her expression clouded slightly. "I thought I'd fit in as much as I could," I told her with a light smile. I was reading a book about the kingdom of Acacia. Whenever I found the

time, I took the chance to read the books on foreign kingdoms that we kept in the mansion's library. Of course I had no intention of going to Acacia until the war was over, but when would that be? In any case, I had deferred my response to the prince's proposal because of the turbulence in Tasmeria.

"Is that right...? At any rate, I'm here because there's something I think you should know."

"Oh? Well, let's hear it."

"Detailed news about the war hasn't yet reached the capital, but I've received word that hostilities have indeed broken out."

So, it's finally begun, I thought as I let out a deep sigh.

"Lord Messi and General Gazell are leading a brave front to defend the kingdom, but it seems that the enemy's numbers are great..."

"From what I remember, Grandfather took a smaller number of troops than usual so he could get there quicker, and the second regiment will meet up with them later."

"Yes, that's right. Did you hear that from your lady mother?"

"Yes."

"I see. Well, the second regiment has already departed. They should reach the battlefield within one or two days."

"That's a relief. Grandfather may be strong, but we can't ignore the fact that we're currently outnumbered."

"This is just between you and me," Tanya said, "but apparently Tweil hasn't just dispatched soldiers. Ordinary citizens are fighting as well."

"Ordinary citizens? If they're not properly trained, how in the world could they do anything?"

"You're precisely right, my lady. What I mean is that even though we're at a disadvantage with regard to numbers, the tide of battle moves in both directions. However, reportedly the citizens' thirst for battle is extremely high, so it remains to be seen how long we can maintain the balance..."

“The average citizens are that eager?” I’d assumed they’d been conscripted. Learning that they actually desired to fight was extremely strange.

“Yes. Apparently there was a famine last year in Tweil.”

“I do remember hearing that, now that you mention it. I see, I see... So it’s their last stand, as it were.” The people of Tweil had no food, and with the future looking bleak, they had two choices: grow weak and lie down to die alongside their kingdom or fight and die in a war in hopes of winning rich, fertile lands for their family, something to leave a speck of hope. If they withdrew, all that awaited them was hell. If they advanced, hell still waited. They had been forced to choose between foul fates.

“I might be overthinking this, but what if Divan is specifically leveraging the famine to his advantage?” I just couldn’t shake that feeling. If the only choice the survivors had was death, it was human nature to cling to even the slightest glimmer of hope. Or they would try to find the reason for it all.

“Surely he wouldn’t...”

“It’s just a theory.”

“But my lady, why would someone refuse defeat only to trap themselves in an even more difficult situation?”

“Is that what it is? When people are under extreme pressure, how long do they retain their ability to reason?”

“Ah...” Tanya was speechless.

“Their land is barren. Moreover, they’re still suffering under the financial burden of losing the last war. How long will it take to cultivate new land and see the fruits of that labor? Public order is worsening due to the poverty and famine. Tweil has grown over with discontent and insecurity. How long can people put up with living under those circumstances?”

Especially when right next door lay Tasmeria, the land of sweet fruit and endlessly fertile lands. Wasn’t it only natural for Tweil’s downtrodden to grow jealous and think, “Why did this have to happen to *our* kingdom?” or “Why is life so unfair?” That would only stoke the feelings of discontent and insecurity.

“It’s entirely possible that the kingdom’s rulers used the unrest to their advantage, thereby diverting the ire away from themselves and toward us.”

“That’s why the citizens want to go to war?”

“The world flows just like a great river. If two drops of water decide to go in a different direction, they can’t fight the larger current. That’s the way of it. Even if some speak against the war, they can’t fight the greater current of the popular sentiment. At some point, they’ll turn in the same direction and change their opinions, telling themselves ‘This is the only way’ or ‘I have no other choice.’”

I’d seen this many times in my past life. So many times, and in so many places, people had frantically tried to change the opinion of the majority during times of turmoil.

“If other people try to take advantage of such sentiments, they’ll push and push and push, and like a flood, they’ll break the dam. The world is overcome by a murky torrent, and everything in its path is caught up in the deluge. It doesn’t take long for the instigators to lose control of the situation.”

Had they purposefully shifted the target of the people’s discontent? Or had they only wanted war in order to avenge their previous losses? The instigators’ motives were as yet unclear. I didn’t think it was just because I was their enemy. Maybe they didn’t yet know what they wanted either. Perhaps their means had become their goal, and now they were fixated only on winning. Or perhaps it was simply that all other avenues were closed.

“Anyway, I digress. I’m sure this has made things difficult for Grandfather. Even though he’s been a general for so long, facing ordinary citizens on the field...”

“Indeed. I’m sure Master concluded quickly that he had no choice but to fight them.”

“Yes, I suppose... Tanya, thank you for the news. If you hear anything else, please come tell me.”

“Of course, my lady.”

After Tanya left, I returned to the window. I didn’t sit right away; I stood and

glanced back and forth between the view and my own clenched fist.

War had begun. Now that the powerful, violent stream of the river had overflowed, how far would it travel? Where would it end? I looked outside, then down at my fist. I couldn't allow myself to be swept up in the current. I couldn't allow myself to be swallowed. If I fell, if I misstepped, I wouldn't drown alone. I stood still for a while, as if re-examining my resolve.

"Hm?" Early the next morning, while I was working, one of the documents caught my eye.

"What is it, my lady?" Tanya asked from beside me.

"I need you to confirm something with Architetto. Why haven't these buildings been demolished?"

"I'll find out right away."

The buildings in question were in the eastern part of Armelia. After the incident with the Boltik family, the duchy had seized the buildings the renegades used as their headquarters, and I had ordered them torn down. When I checked in with Glaus after the incident, he completely ceded his rights to several other properties as a sort of nuisance fee. Thereafter, those buildings had become property of the duchy. I'd deferred deciding what to do with them for a while, but upon re-evaluating the duchy's infrastructure, I'd decided to demolish all the structures in that area to use the land for different purposes.

Now that I was checking the progress, I was shocked to see that there *was* no progress. In fact, they hadn't been touched at all. Honestly, I felt rather pathetic that it had come to this point after I procrastinated on my decision. To be frank, we were in no position to worry about infrastructure.

An official from Architetto whom Tanya had summoned entered the room. "Pardon me, my lady. I've returned with the answer to your question."

"Thank you. So, why has there been no progress on these demolition projects?"

"Yes, well... Due to the frequent comings and goings of people in the area,

construction has been delayed.”

“I’m sorry—what do you mean by that, exactly?”

“Yes, well... When our workers checked who kept frequenting the sites, I was told it was the Boltik family.”

“That’s impossible. No one owns that land. The duchy seized it.”

“Yes, but the construction workers hadn’t confirmed that. Since they didn’t want to cross the Boltik family, they just let it be.”

“I see...” I made a mental note to contact Glaus. “All right, then. Thank you. I’ll follow up on this later with further instructions.”

After the official from Architetto left my study, I let out a deep sigh. Something about this issue nagged at me. In the grand scheme of things, it was low on my priority list, yet warning bells within my mind told me that I couldn’t put it on the back burner.

“Tanya, would you call Dida in here, please?”

“Of course, my lady.”

My mind was busy as I watched her go. Some people claiming to be the Boltik family were entering property that no longer had any connection to the Boltik family. If it was *indeed* the Boltik family, then Glaus had some explaining to do. Yet the day that I met him, I’d come away with the firm impression that Glaus wasn’t the sort of man to go back on his word. So, if I trusted my impression, and if this wasn’t happening on Glaus’s orders, then had more renegades appeared? Or, if these people had nothing to do with the Boltik family at all, what in the world were they doing entering these construction sites?

Either way, I had a bad feeling about this. Things were already tense in the kingdom; I couldn’t afford another catastrophe within the duchy.

“You called for me, Princess?”

“Yes. I’m so sorry to bother you, Dida. I know you’re busy.”

“I’m never too busy for you. What is it?”

For a moment, I asked myself whether it was a good idea to give Dida this

order. He was one of the best men I had. Considering the current climate in the kingdom, I wanted him as close as possible. However, if this was an omen and I ignored it, it might spiral into an even greater problem. I wanted to avoid that at all costs.

After I mentally drew up a list of pros and cons, I ultimately decided to give him the order. “I want you to travel to the east with one of Tanya’s agents and look into something for me.”

“Under these circumstances?” Dida’s gaze grew sharp. I had to laugh at myself; I couldn’t blame him for that reaction.

“Yes. My mind is ringing with warning bells, and my gut tells me that we need to look into it immediately.”

“But Princess, like I said, *right now*? Under these circumstances? As your bodyguard, I don’t want to leave your side for a second.” Dida’s tone was as casual and light as usual, but not a hint of a smile reached his eyes. I’d made his gaze sharpen even more.

“I have Tanya’s agents in every one of our territories, so it wouldn’t take long to discern actions. The thing is, you’re the only one who can tell if Glaus’s words are true. So please, go and be my eyes and ears. Part of your job as my bodyguard is protecting me from danger, right?”

We stared at each other in silence for a while, a heavy tension in the air. It ended suddenly when Dida let out a heavy sigh. “You got me, Princess. If you’re that insistent, you know I can’t disobey.”

“Dida...”

“Are you sure I’m the one for the job? After, you know...”

It seemed it still bothered him that he’d been captured by the enemy during the incident in the east. I saw a hint of a shadow fall across his eyes as he turned his gaze downward. I smiled knowingly at him—he really *was* still worried. But I wasn’t worried about him at all.

“I know you don’t make the same mistake twice.” I truly believed that.

“I’m no match for you, Princess,” Dida muttered with a laugh. “All right, then.

I promise I'll do my job without a hitch this time."

"I know you will. I'm counting on you, Dida."

"...Well, you take care of things here." Dida left everything in Lyle's hands and headed toward the front door as he made to leave the mansion. He'd arranged his affairs and responsibilities as quickly as possible upon receiving the orders from Iris.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of Lady Iris," Lyle replied with a firm nod.

"I can rest at ease knowing she's in your hands. Well, I'll be seeing you."

Rather than use the main exit, Dida left the mansion via a narrower path, which was usually used by the servants. As he drew near the gate, he saw someone standing in front of it. It was Tanya.

"What? Don't tell me you went out of your way to see me off?" Dida teased, but she didn't answer. She just stared at him with a serious gaze, as if studying him. He let out a sigh and started walking again. "I'll be back."

His tone of voice was just as serious as her gaze.

"Wait," she called as he passed her. "My agents are already heading toward the east."

"Yeah, I heard."

"Lady Iris seems to be most concerned about this matter, but honestly I also think something suspicious is afoot."

"Oh?" Dida asked, a glint in his eye. Tanya sensed his inner fighter flare quietly for a passing moment. "You got some kind of premonition?"

"I don't know anything for certain. Be honest—you sense something's off as well, don't you?"

"Well, yeah. You know the place we're talking about."

"My agents don't share your objective, but I want you to take this passcode anyway. It will allow you entry to places where you can communicate with them. I've already told them about you and to do everything you say." Tanya

passed him a scrap of paper.

“Thanks. I owe you one.”

“I-It’s not a big deal. I just want you to carry out Lady Iris’s orders...and to come home safely.” Tanya said it coldly, but it still made Dida smile. He could take “come home safely” in many different ways, after all.

“You got it. I’ll be watching my back.” With that, he left.

Several days had passed since Dida left the mansion. “I wonder if he’s reached the east yet?” I murmured as I worked my way through the stack of papers on my desk. I could only hope that I was worrying needlessly.

Just then, there was a knock at the door, and Tanya entered. “Pardon me, my lady. I have news for you.”

“Is it from Dida already?”

Tanya’s face tensed, which was unusual for her. She shook her head. “No, but it’s very urgent.”

Now I grew tense. “What in the world is it?”

“The former Lord Monroe’s line of defense is crumbling...and I fear that since we received word, it has only further crumbled.”

For a moment, my mind went completely blank. I was so confused that it took me a while to comprehend what she had said. Once I did, I took a deep breath to calm myself. “Is this news certain?”

“I received word from one of my men who I’d placed undercover amongst the former lord’s troops. Taking into account the time it took for the message to reach us, I think it only rational to assume that his line has since fallen.”

“I want to hear details. What circumstances led to this? What about Grandfather’s troops? Surely the second regiment has joined them by now?”

“As of right now, I’ve received no news of Master’s—I mean, General Gazell’s—defeat. Actually, although his regiment and Lord Messi’s private soldiers are outnumbered, they have been fighting valiantly against the enemy. For that

reason, the general's second regiment was instead diverted to provide defense for the former Lord Monroe's troops, but..."

"They lost anyway. The enemy must have sent a great number of troops to Lord Monroe's domain, then."

"Yes. That's where they sent a large number of their formal soldiers."

"The ones fighting in Lord Messi's domain are mostly militiamen, correct? Perhaps they predicted where Grandfather would be fighting, since it's where the war began and they knew he was familiar with Lord Messi's domain after the last war. They directed a large number of militiamen there to outnumber him to ensure that he would be unable to move elsewhere..." I spoke in a stream of consciousness, trying to organize my thoughts out loud. "That's why they attacked Lord Monroe's domain later and why they saved the real soldiers for that battle. Ah, but hang on a minute; even though they had a lot of troops, the second regiment was quite large, no? So how were they defeated so quickly after their arrival?"

"...Because Monroe's citizens took Tweil's side."

"What did you just say?!" I couldn't help but raise my voice. I was so shocked that I leapt out of my seat with a loud clatter. Tanya's calm expression brought me to my senses, and I gradually started to calm down too.

"You can never let anyone but her see you like this, even on accident," I thought in a corner of my mind.

"What is the reason behind this betrayal?" I asked, but Tanya shook her head.

"To the people who lived in Lord Monroe's domain, this was not an invasion... but a liberation. They have run out of patience for Lord Monroe's governance, as well as the kingdom of Tasmeria. So they have revolted and sided with Tweil. I have intel that suggests someone there was further fanning their flames."

"Divan and his cronies?"

"Yes, my lady. It's just as you said before."

"Pardon?"

"You said, 'The world flows just like a great river. If two drops of water decide

to go in a different direction, they can't fight the larger current.' and 'Even if some speak against the war, they can't fight the greater current of popular sentiment. At some point, they'll turn in the same direction and change their opinions, telling themselves, *'This is the only way,'* or *'I have no other choice.'* I think that's probably what happened to the people of the county of Monroe. Seeds of discontent and anxiety were sewn to the point that they couldn't envision a future. The seeds were nourished by a steady stream of incitement, and now they've bloomed. Even if life looked to improve under the first prince's rule, it was too late to stop these seeds from growing."

"That's true..." I let out an inward sigh. Our enemy had very thoroughly prepared for this. Perhaps they had pretended to be aligned with Lord Monroe while, in truth, their aim had always been to stoke rebellion within the citizens.

Still, the kingdom's troops had withdrawn from Monroe, and now the defense troops were retreating as well... "Hang on a second. That means Lord Messi's domain will be attacked from two sides!"

"Yes, I know. What about backup troops from other domains?"

"Do you even think that's possible? They're doubtless all concerned with protecting their own domains." The governors of the domains bordering Monroe and Messi's, surely anticipated attacks as well. It was unlikely any of them would willingly give up their own troops to fight in another domain. Moreover, none of those domains were in a position to sacrifice soldiers.

Someone rapped on the door, shouting from the other side. "Lady Iris, terrible news!"

"We're very busy. Is it urgent?"

"Y-yes! Hostilities have broken out in the east!"

That was the very last thing I'd expected to hear, and once again my mind went blank. The word "hostilities" didn't sound real. It was like I had seen the word but didn't know what it meant. It invaded my head like a stranger. *Why? Why?* Doubts and questions circled through my head over and over again. No matter how I racked my brain, I couldn't come up with a cause.

"My lady, are you all right?" Tanya peered at me with concern. Her face was

awfully pale.

The second I realized that, my last sliver of good sense commanded me to “*Calm down, calm down!*” I automatically reached up to grasp the pocket watch I wore around my neck. My breaths were shallow, but as I listened to the ticking of the clock, they grew more regular, and gradually I was able to see the things around me clearly once more.

“I’m fine, Tanya.” If I fell and let myself be swallowed by the waves, everyone around me would drown too. I *could not* stumble at this crucial moment. I kept telling myself that. “Call Lyle and Sebastian here right away. We must discuss this.”

“Y-yes, my lady!” Tanya broke out into a run, which she rarely did, and rushed out of the room.

“I want you to tell me everything you know, down to the smallest detail,” I instructed the messenger.

“Y-yes, my lady!” The messenger nodded firmly, although he trembled.

When Lyle and Sebastian entered the room, I could tell by their tense expressions that Tanya had already informed them of the situation. “Tanya already told you why I called you here, correct?”

“Yes, but...I’m not quite sure I understand,” Sebastian said, looking quite bewildered.

I had to agree. “I feel the same way. I’ve heard more details, but all we know is the scope of the casualties. We don’t know who our enemy is, nor do we know their goal.” I let out a sigh to try to calm myself.

“Well, my lady? What casualties do we know of?”

“There was a simultaneous attack on the garrison and the town hall. As of now, the town hall is occupied. At present, we know of ten fatalities and several wounded, including government officials, members of the garrisoned forces, and ordinary citizens.”

I bit my lip and clenched my trembling hands into fists. The metallic taste of blood spread through my mouth, but the sharp pain let me know that this was

reality.

“My lady...” Sebastian’s voice was pained as he looked at me. I wasn’t shaking from sadness. While I explained the situation to them, my confusion had cleared, revealing one emotion.

“How dare they...!” Anger. It made me shake. If someone was dissatisfied with the way I governed Armelia, then they should have taken it up with me. They needed to speak up and state their motives clearly. Instead, they didn’t even try to engage me and gave into their anger. They attacked innocent citizens. That behavior made them far worse than a foreign foe.

The four people in the room looked stunned—they had finally sensed my anger.

“And the enemy?” Lyle was the first to come back to himself.

“According to eyewitness reports, there are about a hundred. According to the surviving members of the garrison, they are highly organized. So they’re not just some mob.”

“It is true that it would take more than your average thug to defeat our trained officers. They must have planned this a while ago, or they had significant backing...”

“How did those hundred people convene in the first place?” Tanya asked as if just realizing that. Feeling our gazes on her, she hastily added, “I-I’m sorry. It just bothers me. For a group of one hundred people to move in an organized manner, they would have needed meetings to coordinate, as well as a place to store their weapons until the battle began.”

All of a sudden, I felt like I had been slapped in the face. “That’s it!”

“Huh?” The four of them looked at me, bewildered.

“That must be who was gathering at the buildings we seized. You know, the trespassers that Architetto warned me about. They were using those properties to prepare for today. Several of those buildings have access to the underground sewers. That would give them the ability to appear wherever they wanted in the city without a trace of movement beforehand!”

It was a guess on my part, but after I connected the dots, it made perfect sense. I'd felt strange about this from the start. There was no reason for the Boltik family to trespass into properties when Glaus was their boss. I was even more sure of that now after revisiting the sequence of events that had followed after we took possession of the properties.

Had there been more conflict within the family, and they had split off into another faction? It wasn't out of the question, but I didn't think that was what we were facing. After all, trespassing in these properties would only be asking for greater scrutiny from the Boltiks themselves.

"The more I hear, the less likely I think the attacks were made by some renegade group related to the Boltiks."

"I agree. They must have been planning this for quite some time...almost as if they waited for this exact moment to strike."

The only conclusion I could come to was that they had purposefully waited until the former count's defense force had fallen. Indeed, they had been bold, attacking city hall and the garrison.

Suddenly, I heard loud footsteps and the door burst open.

A woman I didn't recognize entered the room. "Miss Tanya, please pardon me for interrupting, but I have news!"

"What in the world is it? This is a very important meeting."

"I realize that. But..." The woman went up to Tanya and whispered in her ear.

"What did you just say?"

"I confirmed it with one of your agents before coming here."

While they spoke, I confirmed the composition of the garrisons in each of our territories, trying to determine how many of them I could dispatch to the east and how long it would take them to get there.

"My lady, may I have a word?" asked Tanya.

"Are you finished conferring?"

"I'm sorry about that. I have news from Dida."

“I see. And?”

“Dida has checked with Glaus about the trespassers, and he says they are not his men, nor anyone he knows. He will watch his men closely just in case, but... after their internal troubles, things have tightened up in his organization to the point that he thinks it very unlikely there are traitors in his midst.”

“I see... Well then, who in the world could these people be?”

“I also have news from the agents who were dispatched to the east. They used their judgment and took it upon themselves to go undercover at city hall to look into the trespassers.”

“Your agents are very clever. Did they find anything?”

“She’ll give her report to Lyle directly after this.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Lyle said to the woman who had just spoken to Tanya. She nodded firmly.

“Also, my agents have confirmed that the people occupying city hall are the same as those who trespassed on our buildings, just as you suspected, my lady.”

“How did they reach this conclusion?”

“Apparently, they occasionally speak a language other than Tasmeria’s native tongue. When they *do* speak in Tasmerian, they do so with an accent. That can’t be mere coincidence.”

I tensed at this revelation. I’d sensed something else going on behind the scenes, but the thought of another kingdom’s involvement was shocking. “Do they know what language they’re speaking?”

“...It’s Acacian, my lady.”

A heavy silence filled the room. Even if someone wanted to say something, no one dared speak a word. I felt myself trembling slightly. I slowly closed my eyes. I thought of the cries of help from the people who had come to Armelia from other domains, hoping to escape famine. The cries I heard the day I visited the border crossing still numbed my mind. The memory triggered something in me, and all of a sudden I thought I could hear the cries of my people in the east,

begging for help.

I silently scolded myself: *Don't be a coward*. There were people who needed my help. If I covered my ears and ignored those cries for aid, they would suffer.

“Lyle, alert our forces to the north and west; they are to leave the bare minimum at their stations, and the rest are to journey to the east. Transfer right of command to Dida. I want him to annihilate the assailants! Tanya, send word to Dida and deliver these orders.”

They silently nodded.

I exhaled deeply and started to breathe more regularly. “A governor’s foremost responsibility is to protect the lives of their citizens. If my people are in danger, then I will stop those attempting to harm them by whatever means necessary.” Perhaps part of the reason I said it aloud was because I still trembled slightly. The four people in the room had begun to move, but they froze. “If anyone stands in the way of this aim, you have my permission to eliminate them. Entirely. I shall take responsibility for your actions. I may not possess the physical prowess to lead the charge, but know that my heart is with you. As acting governor, I bear the responsibility for whatever happens and will act accordingly.”

All four of them stood ramrod straight as they answered in unison, “Yes, my lady!”

Then they sprang into action.

“Oh, and Sebastian? Gather two or three members from each ministry and assemble an emergency response team. Bring any information regarding the situation in the east to me immediately.”

“Y-yes, my lady!”

Sebastian rushed to carry out my orders. It didn’t take long for him to gather those people and send the new emergency response team to my study.

“My lady, we’ve sent word to the garrisons in each territory, and they have begun dispatching forces to the east.”

“Good. Keep up the good work. Don’t forget to send word to Tanya’s agents

informing them of this.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Sebastian, contact the medical guild and dispatch doctors to the east posthaste. Send a request to the merchant guild for their cooperation as well. Tell them, ‘If you don’t want to see your lifeblood ports destroyed, act now.’”

“Y-yes, of course.”

“What’s the status of aid we requested for the injured citizens?”

“It’s ready to be dispatched right away. We were able to secure the aid at the meeting the other day after numerous budget cuts.”

“That’s good news. Put Lyle in charge of the delivery. And alert our forces right away so they can guard the supplies.”

“Yes, my lady.”

A group of people scurried about busily in my wing of the mansion.

“Th-there’s more trouble!” One of my officials came yelling into the room. I wondered what in the world it could be this time, but I silently gestured for him to speak. “A mysterious ship suddenly appeared at the port in the east. They’re armed and are attempting to take over the harbor!”

“What did you just say?” The entire room went silent. I hadn’t meant for my voice to sound so ominous, but it echoed harshly nevertheless.

“A-and word is it’s only a matter of time before they attack the city...”

The blood drained from every single person’s face upon hearing this news.

“We don’t know if they’re the same people who attacked city hall,” said Lyle. “Perhaps it was someone else, capitalizing on the state of confusion in the east. After all, we have no one there to give orders, nor do we have a fully functional garrison.”

I nodded. “Tanya, have one of your agents investigate and report back on the appearance of this new ship right away.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Her confident response made me release a sigh I’d been keeping pent up.

Under normal circumstances, any suspicious ships would have been spotted in advance and dealt with right then and there. The center of the eastern territory's governance was the town hall, which was occupied by enemy forces. Therefore, no one there could give such orders. The garrison was also not yet fully operational, as Lyle said, so they were less able to protect our citizens from new attacks. Even so, I had a hard time believing we'd so carelessly left such an opening.

"I think Tweil and Acacia are acting in tandem." Everyone went pale at my suggestion. I could hardly blame them. No one had ever suspected that Acacia might attack Armelia. I had no proof to back it up, but if it was true, it meant things were dire indeed. Acacia was an enormous kingdom. It was possible that the force taking control of my port was merely the vanguard.

"Wh-what should we do, Lady Iris?"

All eyes turned toward me. I had prepared myself mentally for this, but knowing that my decision could mean life or death for my citizens was a heavier burden than I had imagined. I detached myself from those emotions and thought it through. Honestly, I would have given anything to have more time to think, but I didn't have that luxury. The east was in danger. I wanted to confirm more of the background details, but I also couldn't wait for intelligence reports to be gathered on the kingdom of Acacia. I would still order them though, of course.

"Lyle."

"Yes?"

"Take a regiment and meet up with Dida."

"But..." It was unusual for Lyle to show any sign of hesitation in response to my orders.

"The strength of one person won't turn this tide. But your leadership will enable the troops to fight to their utmost abilities."

"Very well, but...who will protect you, my lady?"

"Unless I must for some reason flee, the bodyguards remaining here should be sufficient. Besides, if things get dire, I have Tanya." Lyle seemed to acquiesce

at this last acknowledgment, but some hesitation still lingered in his eyes. “Lyle, do you remember what you said to me before? That you would protect me and the things important to me?”

The moment I said that, his breath caught in his throat. “Forgive me, my lady. I nearly broke my vow to you. Tanya, I’m counting on you to protect her in my stead.”

Tanya nodded firmly.

“We don’t have much time, so if you’ll excuse me, I’ll go ahead and ready the troops. Do you have any other additional orders for me?”

“No. I transfer authority on the battlefield to you. I shall take on all responsibility for the decisions made there, so I want you to have confidence and do what you think is right.”

“Yes, my lady. I shall act knowing you have placed your trust in me. If you’ll excuse me.”

Lyle bowed and left the room in a rush. As I watched him go, I prayed for his success in battle.

“M-my lady... Will Lyle be all right?” Rehme asked with tears in her eyes. They’d known each other since they were children, and she seemed awfully worried about him.

“We’ll do everything in our power on our end to make sure that he will be.”

“But...”

“Rehme.” I said her name firmly to discourage any other questions, but she wouldn’t back down.

“P-please let me go with him!”

I was momentarily astounded by her request.

“I can speak Acacian! I also have many tomes with information about the kingdom. If negotiations with their soldiers are at all possible, I’m certain that I will be very useful!”

I immediately dismissed her request. “It’s a very attractive offer, Rehme, but

I'm going to have to say no."

"B-but why...?! Tears streamed down her face.

"Because you can't protect yourself. If you come along, you'll be in the way and hinder their progress. Please understand, Rehme," I said in the firmest tone of voice I could muster.

We stared at each other in silence for a moment.

"Forgive my impertinence, my lady," Rehme finally said.

"I'm sorry, Rehme."

Honestly, I wished I could go as well. I wanted to be there to give orders in real time. It frustrated me to be unable to do so. Nevertheless, there were things only I could do, and I needed to do them.

"Send a request to the kingdom's army for assistance at once."

"Y-yes, my lady."

"And I want to send a personal letter to Acacia."

"B-but, my lady... We still haven't confirmed that Acacia is behind the attacks..."

"Of course. I won't say anything directly; I just want to feel them out. It wouldn't be out of the ordinary for me to send a letter to the prince, after all." The only caveat was that I would have to be extra careful to conceal my true feelings in the letter. If I set the way I truly felt to paper, it would be a letter filled with condemnation.

"That's true, but..."

"Tanya? I know this is an unreasonable request, but do you think your agents would be able to gather intelligence in Acacia?"

"Actually..." Tanya looked at me and hesitated for a moment. I started to regret asking something that would require so much trouble at such short notice, but then she continued. "I already have some agents in Acacia doing just that."

I was so surprised it took me a moment to reply. "Goodness! You're awfully

prepared, aren't you?"

"I made the decision on my own, but...it was regarding you, my lady. I sent my agents to Acacia the instant the prince approached you about marriage. At present, I'm just waiting for their reports."

Ah, so it had to do with the proposal. I was thoroughly impressed with Tanya's judgment. "Let me know as soon as you get that information."

"Of course."

"My lady, I understand that you wish to send a request for assistance from the kingdom's army, but can they spare any soldiers during this time of war?" Sebastian asked.

I shared his apprehension, but I had no choice but to ask for aid. We just didn't have the military force required. At the same time, I couldn't count on help either. When you're drowning and grasping at straws, you're still going to drown.

So I needed to think, then think some more. My mind was racing. I thought of several plans that weren't even really plans yet, which popped into my head and disappeared just as quickly. I couldn't think straight, perhaps because of the anxiety. I was lost in a labyrinth of thoughts, all circling back to "What should I do?" and "What *can* I do?"

I closed my eyes and let out a deep sigh to clear my head. Then I surrendered myself to the waves of thoughts once more. This time, I couldn't get lost, and I couldn't drown. I had to identify each problem and put my goals in order.

"Armelia may be farther from Tweil than we are here, but you never know what will happen in times of war. If you sense any sparks from the fires of war have spread to you, you must let your mother know at once."

Suddenly, my mother's words flashed through my mind. I spoke one of my ideas aloud. "I'm going to ask House Anderson for aid directly, through my mother."

House Anderson's personal guard was composed entirely of powerful soldiers trained by my grandfather, which meant that they had the best training in the entire kingdom.

“But my lady... It’s against Tasmerian law to dispatch one’s private guard to another domain!” one of the Codice officials protested.

“As I said, I will ask for aid *through my mother*. What would be strange about my mother returning home to Armelia and bringing along a sizable number of bodyguards at such a dangerous time in the kingdom?” Even I had to admit, that was quite a gray area of the law. “I shall notify the first prince myself. If there’s a consequence to be had for asking consent after the fact, then I shall take full responsibility.”

Although honestly, I didn’t think Dean would protest. If those around him did, then I would indeed assume responsibility. If I had the power to save the duchy, then this was my best chance.

“I shall prepare the letters this minute. Meanwhile, I want you to gather all the information you have and respond accordingly! Our utmost priority is to protect the duchy!”

“Yes, my lady.”

After everyone rushed off to get to work, I returned to my study to start writing letters. First, I had to explain the situation to my uncle, who was currently the head of House Anderson, and formally request aid. Next, I had to suppress my boiling rage toward the kingdom of Acacia and compose a letter that was not accusatory but which clearly demonstrated that we grasped the situation at hand.

Then, I wrote a letter to the Ministry of Defense, explaining the situation and formally requesting aid. Finally, I wrote a letter to Dean. As I did so, my hands suddenly froze. I wondered what he was doing.

I had to chuckle wryly at myself for thinking something so foolish. He was fighting, of course, just as I was. But he shouldered far more responsibility than I did. Several times since returning home, I’d had to bite my lip to stop myself from calling for Dean aloud. Doing so had become second nature. He had been by my side during every grueling ordeal I’d faced as governor. Perhaps that was why I found myself wishing over and over, “*If only he were here...*” and “*I want to be with him.*”

It seemed I had become quite weak. But I had many lingering regrets. We’d

said goodbye to each other that day, determined to travel down different paths, even if we headed in the same direction. Wasn't that the decision I made? Nothing had changed. Spoiling myself and choosing the easy path would destroy everything I had worked so hard to build up. As such, I absolutely would not allow myself to run to or depend overmuch on others.

I picked up my pen once more and continued to write. I wrote to the prince not as Iris but as the acting governor of the domain of Armelia.

The royal palace was known for maintaining a constant air of elegant austerity, but at present it was uncharacteristically chaotic. People ran back and forth, and shouts could be heard from all over. Members of the royal family, who were most esteemed for their refined conduct, should have turned their noses up at the uncouth behavior and tense atmosphere, or perhaps even shrunk back in horror. However, Leticia was going to and fro, seemingly unbothered.

"Hm? There you are, Brother! I've been looking for you." She had been searching for her older brother, Prince Alfred.

"Letty, how in the world did you find me here?" Alfred didn't look particularly surprised to see his sister, but he did seem a little tired.

"I just searched all the places I figured you would be, that's all."

"Ah..." Alfred let out a wry chuckle at the triumphant look on her face.

"Things have grown awfully noisy, haven't they?"

"Yes, they have... He really left me with a mess."

"When will you be leaving for battle?" All of a sudden, Leticia's cheerful, lighthearted tone disappeared and her voice became direly serious. Her abrupt change of attitude startled Alfred for a moment, delaying his response.

In that moment of hesitation, he decided it would be pointless to beat around the bush, so he confirmed with his next question. "How did you know about that?"

"I could guess as much even though I can't attend the meetings. War broke

out in the midst of a downturn in the royal family's popularity. Therefore, it's crucial for you, as the future king, to go to the battlefield yourself and show our people that you will not abandon our kingdom. Moreover, you're the only one who can unite both the kingdom's army and the knights behind your cause. You built a relationship with the soldiers as Dean, and training with the knights has guaranteed that they will follow you. We need all the military strength we can get, so there's no better person to lead the charge. I know that means you'll be risking your life and your safety, but this is the greatest chance to build on your achievements as future king. So, for all those reasons, I also believe you should go to battle."

"You're exactly right, Letty. But I doubt you came looking for me just to tell me you agree with me."

"No, but...first I want to know why you're here."

"Because I just received a letter from Lord Armelia's daughter."

"Oh!" Joy spread across Leticia's face at the name, but she swiftly regained her composure. "I heard there's all sorts of trouble in Armelia. Has she requested military aid?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, under these circumstances, I can't provide it."

"That's true, taking the urgent situation in the north under consideration. Then Armelia will..."

"She anticipated we wouldn't be able to provide the aid she needed, so she went ahead and sent a request to House Anderson for their cooperation."

Leticia let out a noise of admiration. "I'd expect nothing less from Lady Iris."

"I know."

"Then why do you look so distraught?"

"That's not for you to worry about." Alfred quickly and firmly dismissed her question, because she had hit the nail on the head; he was distraught. She—Iris, that was—had said that she wanted him to approve her request as the acting governor of Armelia to receive troops from House Anderson's private guard. The request in and of itself was not the problem. Some nobles might have

something to say about it later, but when one considered Armelia's situation, it was clear there was no other choice. Alfred had already decided to give his full support. He didn't have a problem with any of that. The problem lay in the final part of her letter.

At the end, she had written not as the acting governor of Armelia toward the future king but toward "Dean," who had worked for Armelia. It said: "Do not, under any circumstances, act as 'Dean.'" And that since this was Armelia's problem, they would deal with it themselves. She said regardless of their past connections, he did not need to help her when he already had his hands full with his own catastrophe. This was the message she had left for Dean.

Alfred couldn't just dismiss it as some nonsense. In fact, up until he read that last paragraph, he had been wondering what he could do to help—as "Dean," of course. Even though he knew full well that any levelheaded person would say he should go to the north under these circumstances, he was still trying to rack his brains to determine a way to return to Armelia. These thoughts had plagued him.

His rational mind knew what he should do as the king. On the other hand, the desire to go to Iris's aid roiled in the depths of his heart, daring to rise to the surface at any moment. The state of his own emotions bewildered and filled him with frustration. Consequently, his clear distress.

"Well, I can't force you to answer me. I shall tell you why I came to see you, nonetheless." Leticia's voice pulled Alfred out of his reverie and back to reality. "I've been thinking about inciting a coup d'état and have come to confer with you."

"Huh?!" Even Alfred was flabbergasted by this announcement. Historically—actually, not all that historically, since it had happened so recently—the two princes had fought a wretched battle for succession. So who in the world in their right mind would speak about instigating a coup d'état at this moment, not to mention asking the opposing party's advice? "What kind of joke is this, Leticia?"

Taking all of that into account, his question was most reasonable.

"It's not a joke. I've been dreaming about this for ages." The smile on Leticia's

face was adorable, yet the words coming out of her mouth were beyond extreme. “I’ve lived my whole life being protected by you. In fact, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that you’re the only reason I’m still alive.” Her voice took on a sing-song quality. “That’s why I started dreaming. Dreaming about being useful to you. I want to help you shoulder those heavy burdens of yours.”

It was difficult to see how that sentiment was connected to a coup. Alfred gave her a confused look, wondering what the connection was.

“Answer me honestly. Do you see becoming the king as nothing more than a burden?” Leticia asked. “Truth be told, do you really care at all?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Letty. If that were true, then why would I be sitting here?”

“Because the only way to keep us both alive was to sit in that throne. Surely you wouldn’t have been satisfied with our other brother and Ellia merely giving up succession rights and becoming your subjects.”

That was all true. So for a moment, Alfred couldn’t say a word. “Still, I was only ever destined to sit here on this throne.”

“Lies.” Letitia dismissed him with a laugh. “That’s not the only destiny in your heart. You were so happy when you worked in Armelia. Even now, you were fighting yourself over your position as future king versus your personal desires, were you not?” After those words left Leticia’s mouth, the smile vanished from her face and was replaced with a grave expression. “Brother, I have no doubt in my mind that you would make a wonderful king, if you ascended to the throne as things stand. You would serve as the cogs that would make this kingdom turn and do a good job of it too. But there’s a difference between the things you *could* do and the things you *should* do.”

“You don’t think I could put forth my best effort?”

“That’s right. Not if it means you have to lose her and your heart freezes over.”

Alfred let out a scornful laugh. “My heart? You think that’s a king’s most important quality?”

Leticia didn’t answer him. She just stared back at him silently.

“Have you forgotten our father? Our father who was absolutely negligent in all matters after he lost our mother?”

“I am too young to remember ever meeting him, so truthfully, no. I only know what I’ve heard.”

Alfred smiled in acknowledgment.

“I’m not saying heart is everything. Of course I know that sometimes it’s necessary to make levelheaded judgments. But the heart...it’s the one factor that leads people to follow another. And although people will follow those with heart, it’s also human nature to say...things. No matter how talented you are, when things don’t go smoothly, your heart will suffer. Conversely, when things go too well, your heart becomes isolated and fearful. The order of our kingdom is being sliced apart by a sharp blade and built anew. We’re showing as much strength as we can. But will you have the heart to unite the people once more? That depends on how you implement your plans.”

“I see. I’ll take that into consideration.” Alfred started to rise to his feet, signaling an end to the conversation.

“Brother! Please, hear me out until the end!”

“I have my dignity as your brother, Letty. Do you really think I would let you take on such a heavy responsibility on your own and just move on?”

“I wouldn’t be alone.”

“What?”

“Ah, nothing... I just mean, I honestly wouldn’t mind.”

Alfred’s gaze grew sharper when he saw her grow flustered and shy. “Nevertheless, I want to be king. Even if I have to do it alone, and even if the path ahead is paved with thorns, I’ll do it for the sake of my ideals.”

Just then, there was a knock at the door. After Alfred said to enter, Berne came into the room.

“Excuse me, Your Highness, there’s something I need to check—Princess Leticia?” Berne tensed, sensing the atmosphere in the room. “Ah, it seems you’re in the middle of something. Shall I come back later?”

Leticia spoke first. “No, Berne. You can stay there.”

“But...”

“I want you to hear this too.”

A troubled look came over Berne’s face at her serious tone.

Alfred narrowed his eyes thoughtfully as he watched their exchange. “That reminds me, Berne. Didn’t you say you had already met Letty before I introduced you to her?”

“Yes, when I visited the palace to give the queen dowager a message on my father’s behalf. I fear I was rude to her then, as I had no idea she was the princess.”

“I told you before, you weren’t rude at all.” Leticia smiled wryly at Berne. “Berne, what do you think about Lady Iris’s social standing as the acting governor of Armelia?”

Berne looked truly perplexed by the question. Not only that, but he had no idea that Alfred had once worked as Iris’s right-hand man in Armelia—miraculously, he had never been in the duchy at the same time as “Dean.” The reason he was perplexed was purely because he had no idea why Leticia would ask that question, at this moment. “As someone who serves in the kingdom’s government, I think that her marriage into another kingdom would be a terrible loss for Tasmeria.”

“Oh?” Alfred listened with interest and urged Berne to continue.

“This might sound like bias, as I’m her brother, but my older sister is extremely gifted. Specifically, she has a talent for bringing people together and convincing them to follow her. I doubt she’s aware of it, though.” A hardened smile crossed Berne’s face. “It’s become even more apparent to me since I started working for you, Your Highness. Although I do pride myself in having more knowledge than my sister in some areas, such as the precedents for each of the kingdom’s laws and policies and such.”

“I’ve heard great things about your enthusiasm—that even during your free time, you’ve been studying at the palace library and receiving private instruction from specialists,” said Alfred. “Some people have said you have such

an intensity when you're immersed in your studies that they dare not speak to you."

"Thank you for the compliments, Your Highness. Still, I'm not even close to my sister's caliber." Despite Alfred's praise, Berne's look was stern rather than smiling. "The foundation of putting work into practice is knowledge. If you don't have a certain amount of knowledge, you won't be able to do your job effectively. Conversely, even if you have that knowledge, being able to utilize it effectively is a whole separate issue."

Knowledge was just a tool. Someone could ask you to use it without understanding it themselves. "My sister knows *how* to use the things she sees and hears. Her ability to innovate is truly extraordinary."

Alfred had to privately agree with Berne on that one, because as of late, he had spent more time with Iris than Berne had. Therefore, he felt he had likely seen her abilities up close more than even her brother.

"Most of all, she's surrounded herself with highly capable people. She always says that her staff is her greatest treasure. She fully supports them and creates an environment that encourages their growth, but I think that the main reason they're so loyal to her is because she's *herself*. If she's lacking in any area, they fill the gap. No matter how much I try to learn, I understand that ultimately there's a limit to what I alone can do. I don't have the time to learn every single thing about every single field. But my sister has assembled experts in all those fields, and she encourages diligence. I know this is a terribly roundabout way of saying it, but I think that knowing how to do one's job effectively, as well as possessing leadership qualities that make talented people want to follow you, is far more important than sheer breadth of knowledge. My sister has all of that. Not to mention, she's an expert in a number of particular subjects. As such, all in all, I think it would be a shame for the kingdom to let her go."

"I see... Then I take it you are opposed to her marriage, Berne?"

"Not the idea of marriage entirely, no. However, I want her to stay in Tasmeria. If I have to cede my right of succession to be the next Duke Armelia to make that happen, then so be it."

"What...?"

“The reason Armelia is what it is today is because of her work. She’s the one who deserves to be the governor. I’m certain that the people of Armelia share my sentiment.”

“Perhaps this is an insensitive question, but are you really all right with that?” Leticia asked. “It doesn’t upset you?”

As Leticia said, it was insensitive, but there was also a hint of bitterness in her voice. After all, the foundation of the kingdom was built on primogeniture, the passage of succession and inheritance to firstborn heirs. Most of the time, these rights were reserved for the oldest *son*. It was rare indeed that a woman inherited. For instance, if an aristocratic couple had no sons and only daughters, or if the oldest son passed away before he could become head of house, they would name the oldest male in the next generation their heir and wait until he came of age to succeed. Honestly, it was unheard of for a woman to become head of house while a healthy son still lived. Even if a woman *did* become heir, it would only be because there were absolutely no living males even distantly related to succeed or there was some other substantial problem with the eligible men.

Thus, even if Berne did give up his rights, it was inevitable that people would assume something must be very wrong with him for Iris to be named heir. Even though it wouldn’t be true, people were so stuck on customs and tradition that they would just assume it was. Leticia’s question came from the same place.

“No, not at all,” Berne answered with a pleasant smile. “Who cares what other people say? I wouldn’t hesitate to cede my rights if it meant that it was in the best interests of the people. Those are my thoughts on the matter.”

All of a sudden, Alfred detected something off with what Berne just said. “Wait. You’re not telling me the whole truth, are you?”

Berne didn’t flinch. “I’m not sure what you mean,” he said calmly. “I was giving my impression on my sister’s prospective marriage in response to Her Highness Princess Leticia’s question.”

Alfred let out an amused laugh. *Oh, how things have changed*, he thought. It was especially amusing to him after he’d seen Berne be part of Yuri’s adoring entourage from afar. “I’m sad, Berne. I thought we might be able to open up

and be frank with each other. Have you not yet fully accepted me as your master, and so you aren't letting me into your trusted inner circle?"

They stared at each other for a while, as if trying to seek out the truth.

The first one to give in was Berne. "This is only my opinion. There's no need to listen to me."

Alfred nodded.

"Your Highness, remember what I told you before?" Berne asked. "That I had seen hell on earth."

"Yes, I remember."

"The people responsible for that hell were the nobility, Your Highness. Once, nobles were the ones who brought the people together and protected them. They took on that responsibility to *earn* their status. Over time, they have forgotten those obligations and have been reduced to nothing but arrogant, insolent burdens who do nothing but oppress the citizens."

"I know. Hence my decision to punish the nobles guilty of those crimes most severely, to serve as a deterrent against that sort of behavior in the future."

Berne smiled weakly. "As I said before, nobles tend to forget their self-respect and responsibilities with the passage of time. Who's to say the same thing won't happen again?"

"That's true. You're absolutely correct, Berne. That's why it's urgent that we set up a new system in this kingdom. We need even more reforms so that we never forget these wounds."

"Indeed. But, Your Highness, I firmly believe that 'Unless people change their consciousness, nothing will change in the end.'"

"What do you mean?"

"Before I answer, Your Highness, may I ask a question?"

"You may."

"What is the difference between nobles and ordinary citizens?"

"That's awfully general. If I were to give you a superficial answer, it would be

wealth and power. However, their lifestyles and values also differ.”

“I agree. But I think that if you really consider it, that’s all it is.”

“Which means...?”

“The difference is nothing more than where you happened to be born and the environment in which you grew up. It has nothing to do with one’s temperament or abilities. It’s the same for men and women. Gender may bring some differences, but it has nothing to do with actual personality,” Berne said.

As he spoke, it was almost as if he were arranging his thoughts out loud. “The differences between social statuses and gender are laid out in separate tracks at birth. At first glance, this is an efficient system because your future is planned out for you from the start. All one has to do is work toward that set future. However, that doesn’t mean one is born with talent. The son of a governor doesn’t necessarily have the qualities to become a good governor himself. A merchant’s son doesn’t necessarily have a knack for trade. Of course, one could make up for lack of talent with hard work. But who would do that when their future is already promised to them? Certainly I’m not saying that there aren’t any hard workers amongst those due to inherit such responsibilities, however...”

Alfred’s eyes widened. Berne’s argument was entirely outrageous to him, but at the same time, he couldn’t ignore it.

“When one’s future has been predetermined, there is no necessity for growth. At the same time, other talents one may have been born with remain undiscovered. So, no matter what kind of new system you may devise, as long as it’s done within the confines of this restrictive environment, the kingdom will remain stagnant.”

“So in other words, you’re saying you have misgivings about the class system itself—particularly the existence of the noble class?”

Given the opportunity, Berne directly argued against the class system—which, in the current status quo in the kingdom—was unheard of. “The nobles are the ones who created that hell, because they were handed guaranteed futures and did nothing but rest on their laurels.”

“But, Berne, if you think people’s futures should be decided not by birthright or gender, but on their own personality and talents, then the kingdom would become a meritocracy. Then wouldn’t the people who were aiming for the same future be entangled in a struggle with each other?”

“Yes, they would. First, I want to say that I’m not entirely against the class system. There are good and bad sides to any organizational structure. It’s true that there are positive aspects to an heir being decided beforehand, such as no pointless fighting and an uninterrupted flow of succession.”

“Then what are you trying to say?”

“That if we don’t change the peoples’ consciousness, then nothing will change in the end. Your Highness, what I suggested before is so radical it can’t even really be discussed. That’s the problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“In the current environment, no opportunities exist. Everyone is so stuck on their idea of how things should be that there aren’t even choices. Why don’t the ordinary citizens have any say in the government? Why can’t women advance in our society? The same goes for my sister. If she were a man, she would never be asked to cede her domain. One only need look to Armelia to see her power and talent. Perhaps the advantages to her crossing the sea and marrying into another kingdom are considerable in some respects, but even still, it is my personal opinion that the loss to Tasmeria will outweigh all those merits. Yet the status quo of our kingdom wouldn’t hear of it. Women ‘must’ protect the home, women ‘should’ marry and bear children; if she has to marry anyway, it ‘might as well’ be to the best possible suitor. Because those thoughts are in the forefront of everyone’s minds, no one dares to offer an alternative. Everyone is trapped in the cage of conventions and pretending they don’t see the incredible loss this kingdom would suffer were she to leave.”

“That remark sounds painfully true—that we are trapped in the cage of conventions...”

“This was quite long-winded, Your Highness,” Berne apologized, “but that is the answer to your question, when you asked if I was upset. I wouldn’t feel right if I *weren’t* upset. The fact is, my sister is the eldest child and she possesses

more talent for governance. Of course I feel frustrated that I can't measure up, but none of my negative feelings have anything to do with the fact of her womanhood. Furthermore, my greater feelings are that my sister should remain in the kingdom as Armelia's governor."

A satisfied smile appeared on Leticia's face. "Brother, I came here to tell you the same thing."

"What?" said Alfred.

"Goodness, have you forgotten? I came to tell you that I want to be the next monarch," Leticia said.

Berne's eyes nearly bugged out of his head.

"Half of the people in this kingdom are women, yet the government is composed exclusively of men," Leticia went on. "That means all of our policies and laws are made from only their point of view. Even when Grandmother was queen, she was treated as little more than a link to the future king until Father succeeded her. So, I want to become the first true female monarch and govern the kingdom from an entirely new perspective. I want to bring forth new opportunities for our citizens and create a new system of values."

Leticia spoke clearly and firmly as she faced Alfred. "As I said before, you've already divided our kingdom with a sharp blade. Right now, it's broken. I'm the one who's going to rebuild it. I'm already doing a great deal of your work and have experience in every area of concern. You know there's no one better for the job than me, right?"

Alfred laughed at her statement. "Ha ha ha! I never would've dreamed that's what you wanted, Letty. I had no idea."

"Heh heh. So have I done well?"

They smiled at each other.

"I see, I see. You've got more practical experience for the job than a cabinet minister, so there's no question about your abilities. Not to mention, you have Grandmother as both your backing and confidante. It's not beyond the realm of possibilities at all. Now if only something happened to both Prince Edward *and* Prince Alfred, not even the nobles could argue with your succession..."

“Exactly. So you see, Brother? It’s a coup d’état.”

Berne, who had just happened upon this conversation between the siblings in the first place, looked thoroughly baffled.



“It certainly seems that way. But, Letty, right now this is nothing but a dream. If you bring about this reality and are rejected, will you still try to force your ideals to come to fruition?”

Leticia’s eyes were serious and filled with resolve. “Not having ideals is the same as wandering without a destination. If I become the monarch, it doesn’t matter how vigorously people try to deny me or if things don’t go smoothly. I will continue dreaming. I will continue looking forward. I’ve already prepared myself for the possibility that the path ahead will be rocky.”

“Well, if you’ve thought it all out that far, Letty, surely you know what I must do.”

“Yes, of course.” Leticia whispered a few words in Alfred’s ear, to which he nodded. “Now you can go off to war without any worries. I’ll take care of everything here.”

“I don’t want my little sister to have to do these things... But if you understand that, then I can go to the north with a free conscience.”

“Yes. If anything at all comes up, I’ll deal with it. I want you to focus on the war. I’ll be praying for your safety.”

A bell rang with a heavy, majestic sound. Alfred rose to his feet.

“I’m off.”

“Be careful,” said Berne.

“I’ll be praying for your safety in the fray,” said Leticia.

With that, they watched Alfred go.

“Are you sure that was for the best?” Berne asked her after Alfred left the room.

“What do you mean?”

“That I was here for this discussion. No matter how I look at it, I’m not sure someone of my position should have been privy to such a conversation.”

Leticia smiled wryly. “I suppose you’re right. Nevertheless, ever since I met you in the gardens of the palace, I wanted to ask what you thought. I was

awfully interested.”

Berne gave her a puzzled look.

Leticia pressed her lips together as if suppressing a laugh. “What I heard just now surpassed my expectations. Thank you, Berne.”

“There’s no need to thank me. All I did was say what I think. But may I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“Do you want to be the monarch because that’s what you truly want, or is it because as you said that day in the gardens, you want to help shoulder your brother’s burdens?”

Leticia’s smile deepened. “It’s true that I want to take on my brother’s burdens. Until now, I’ve been the one to burden my brother because I’ve had to entirely rely on him. But my pride won’t allow me to continue being the one always under protection. Berne, what you said to me that day—it lit a fire in me.”

Berne’s eyes widened with surprise.

“I’d always had these vague doubts in my head about the government and the way things operated in the kingdom, ever since I was a little girl. Your words brought clarity to those feelings. I decided I wanted to change things. That’s when I truly found the resolve to set my sights on the throne. So, Berne, to answer your question, I want to become the monarch of my own free will, and for my own desires.”

“I see...”

“That’s why I want you to walk down that path by my side. Because your thoughts so closely mirror my ideals.”

“You want me to work for you, you mean?”

“I know about your first conversation with my brother.”

A guilty look crossed Berne’s face.

The first time he had seen Alfred was at the palace, after he had returned

from that hellish landscape.

“Shouldn’t you be going to see Edward?” That was the first thing Alfred had said to him, his smile amused.

“I came here because I want to undo the horrible things happening across the land. I’m prepared to work myself to the bone for the people of this kingdom.” Berne said it matter-of-factly, as if to say he had no interest in the feud between the brothers.

Alfred laughed heartily. “Ah, I see. So it could have been either of us. You want to use me to further your own ideals.” He murmured with interest, “Very well, then. Use me all you want. But once you’re finished with me, I will fire you instantly. You’ve put on quite the show. I won’t let you say you can’t do it either. In exchange, you can keep your watchful eye on me. If you ever bear witness to me slighting the people in any way, go ahead and abandon me.”

“I agree. I shall walk down the same path as long as Your Highness lives to serve the kingdom and its people.”

This was how their relationship of master and aide had been established.

“I haven’t forgotten what I said either,” said Berne. “It was a vow to myself. So, I rushed headlong into it. Be that as it may, there’s no reason for me to leave His Highness’s side.”

“Did you not hear our conversation? If I ascend to the throne, my brother will naturally remove himself from the kingdom’s government. That’s why I want you to walk by my side instead.”

“The only thing I can truthfully say is that no matter what the situation becomes, it will not change my focus.”

Leticia smiled. “I see. That’s enough for me. Now, Berne. I’m sure the orders have already come down from my brother. All the responsibilities inside the palace will be transferred from him to me. There are several things I need to check, so come to my study with me.”

With that, they left together.

Meanwhile, Merellis was at the Armelias' manor in the capital getting ready. Beneath her cloak she wore men's clothes that were easy to move in. Her sword hung at her waist. Her hair was twisted up in a simple bun, and she wore no jewelry.

"You're leaving?" Louis asked when she entered his room.

"Yes."

Silence fell between them. They stared at each other wordlessly for a few moments, their eyes speaking everything their mouths did not. They both saw the conflict and emotion reflected in the other. Their eyes said, *"I don't want to let you go; I don't want to be apart,"* yet neither of them spoke the words.

Instead, Merellis smiled, taking it all in before finally speaking. "Never fear. I promise I'll return to my husband's side alive. That's the only place I can call home, darling—by your side."

Louis smiled again. "I know. I believe in you. I can't go with you, but you know that my heart is always by yours. I will help shoulder the burdens you can't bear alone, and I will protect you from all that stands in your way from afar. The vow I made to you long ago will never change. Go, without any reservations."

"Yes... Yes, I will. I'm leaving now, darling."

With that, Merellis headed for House Anderson. She exchanged a few pleasantries before proceeding directly to meet with her older brother, Pax.

"Iris told me what's happening," he said with a heavy voice.

"Yes. I'm sorry, Brother, but..."

"Your daughter truly is meticulous. She came up with a justification to send our soldiers to Armelia and even sent a notification to the first prince!" Pax interrupted her with a wry chuckle. "I've already summoned some troops. However, I can't send very many."

"That's understandable. How many?"

"A hundred active duty. Mostly those who have fought on the battlefield with you."

"Then we'll be fine."

“I’ve called them here but given no orders. Whether they follow and obey will be up to you.” It sounded as if Pax was issuing a challenge: *Can you make them obey?*

“That’s fine. They would follow orders issued by their governor, of course, but at the end of the day, I’m the one leading them. If they don’t follow my orders, then we’re in for chaos on the battlefield. Is that what you’re afraid of?” Merellis responded, seemingly unfazed.

“You certainly are perceptive when it comes to war.”

“How rude. Perhaps it used to be, but I’ve since transitioned to navigating the waters of high society as a duke’s wife.”

“Yes, but you also treat that like a battlefield.”

“True,” she acknowledged with a laugh. “In any case, thank you, Brother.”

“I’ll pray for your success in battle.”

“Yes.”

Merellis left her brother’s study in high spirits, then made her way to the sparring grounds, where the private guard of House Anderson was assembled. The hundred or so soldiers were already waiting for her, standing in rank and file. As soon as she appeared, a buzz spread through the grounds but quickly died down. Merellis didn’t say anything in particular to make that happen. She just stood there. Her commanding presence was more than enough to silence everyone on the spot.

“My name is Mer, and I’ve been charged with commanding this regiment. Some of you may already know me, but for those who don’t, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” Her voice was soft and light, a stark contrast to the tension that enveloped the crowd. In the next moment, her tone grew stern and flat. “We’re heading to the duchy of Armelia. They are under attack by two separate forces of unknown origin. Their only line of defense are the Armelian garrisons. Even after we add our numbers to the battle, we will be at a disadvantage. However, I believe that as long as we are together and charge headlong into battle, we have the power to turn things in our favor.”

Merellis looked over at the gathered people and smiled. A shiver raced

through the soldiers' hearts.

"Each and every one of you are fearless fighters trained by the great General Daz Gazell himself, so you have nothing to fear. I shall clear the way for you. I shall lead you to victory. Fear nothing and follow me. Do not drown in the sea of blood but breathe in it. Go to that line between life and death and come out the other side alive."

She spoke with a frank, even tone, yet her words had a strange, alluring magic that everyone felt at once. It was as if they could see the battlefield behind her in that moment.

"We will not be defeated. Because if we fall, then Armelia falls, and so does House Anderson. Then everyone you hold dear shall be lost in the flames of war."

The look in the soldiers' eyes changed. She had stirred the survival instincts within them and lit the fire of their fighting spirit. Her words fell over them and imbued them with her passion.

"Let us destroy them and deliver a soul-crushing defeat. May we emblazon the name of House Anderson upon their minds and fill their hearts with fear so that they shall never, ever dare to do something so foolish as to invade our kingdom again."

The soldiers raised their swords in unison, proof that she had captured their hearts.

A pleased smile crossed Merellis's face as she looked around at the sight. It lasted only a fleeting moment. She gave her orders.

Soon after, she was leading her soldiers on horseback toward Armelia. She rode furiously and with such skill that even these impeccably trained soldiers could barely keep up with her.

"Excuse me, Captain. We've finished replenishing our supplies."

They stopped a few times en route to rest and replenish supplies, but they still neared their destination in roughly half the usual time it took to get there.

The soldiers called Merellis their captain, and she spoke and acted as such.

“Very well. We’re almost to Armelia. I want you to double check and make sure everyone has the equipment they need. We’ll leave in ten minutes.”

“Yes, Captain!”

The soldiers’ tension grew as they got closer and closer to Armelia. It was increasingly apparent in the ones who had never been to battle before.

“Shrey, if you see anyone rattled by their nerves, go talk to them. A certain amount of anxiety is normal, but if it’s too much, then it can dull their reflexes.”

“Yes, Captain. Although I think as soon as they see how you fight, all their nerves will disappear.” Shrey’s normal lighthearted manner was gone, replaced by a serious, heavy mood.

Those like Shrey, who had shared the battlefield with Merellis before, carried a different kind of tension than those who hadn’t yet seen her in action. The greenhorns were experiencing a crushing pressure alongside their anxiety, while the veterans nursed an invigorating excitement. It meant a great deal to them that Merellis was leading them. They had seen what she could do on the battlefield, and now that she burned with an even greater intensity, they felt an awe and reverence, just as Shrey did. Normally he kept his reverential feelings toward her well hidden, but the gravity in his voice now couldn’t conceal it.

“Really? I’m not so sure about that,” Merellis chuckled wryly. It wouldn’t be a stretch of the imagination to say that Shrey had blind faith in her. She caught herself responding to him in her normal tone. “Anyway, please do so. If you sense any problems at all, let me know right away.”

Ten minutes later, after he reported that all her orders had been carried out smoothly and there were no problems, they were back on the road.

Chapter 25:

The Duke's Daughter and the War

THE NORMALLY BUSTLING PORT of eastern Armelia was now filled with tension. The garrison had been attacked, and city hall was under occupation. On the heels of that assault, an armed group took the port by force. The once busy streets were nearly empty; it was no wonder that smiles had disappeared from the people's faces. Meanwhile, Dida had acted on Iris's orders and taken the bare minimum number of men to fight the forces both at city hall and the port.

The armed group at the port were dressed in military uniforms—the kind Acacian soldiers wore. The very situation Iris and the others feared was unfolding before Dida's eyes. Even though he had anticipated this, a part of him still couldn't believe that it was actually happening. A cold sweat dripped down Dida's back in the tense atmosphere. *You really never know what can happen*, he thought.

The enemy had mobilized as the sun rose, trying to invade the town. Dida worked with the garrison to deal with these attacks and keep them under control. Since the eastern towns had been founded long ago, most of the roads were very narrow and winding, which gave Dida an advantage; it limited the number of enemy soldiers that could enter from any point at a given time. Dida used the layout of the city as he deployed his men, focusing on protecting the citizens. That didn't change the fact that the situation was growing worse and worse.

"Dida! The first company's total wounded soldiers have surpassed thirty percent!"

"Withdraw the first company and send the second company to the front line. Trade out quickly so the enemy won't have a chance to strike." Dida spoke in his usual light tone, but deep within, he was fraught with anxiety and apprehension. Even though few soldiers were gravely wounded, as time wore on, more and more were getting hurt. Most of all, everyone was increasingly fatigued. Only a handful had ever seen real battle before this, so their nerves

exacerbated that fatigue. The main thought going through Dida's mind was that at this rate, they wouldn't last more than a few more days—though he didn't dare say it aloud. If the enemy broke through their line of defense, they could easily reach the duchy's capital. And here, they had neither the armaments nor the structural advantage needed to withstand an invasion.

Most of all, Iris would be devastated if anything happened to the citizens. Dida couldn't let that happen.

He scratched his head as he looked around. He wanted to escape this dead-end situation and his own negative thoughts. Just then, a group of men caught his eye. They were carrying wounded soldiers to medical treatment.

"Hey! Who are they? They're not from our company." They weren't wearing the garrison's uniform but regular clothes like you'd see anywhere in town. He couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right for a group like that to be rushing into battle.

"O-oh, these are local volunteers."

"What? Hey, you! Hurry up and evacuate! Can't you see it's dangerous here? If anything happens to you, that'll really put us in a bind!" Dida yelled as he approached them. The citizens jolted in surprise for a moment, then glared and yelled at him in return.

"We live here! How can we just sit around and do nothing when you're risking your lives for us?"

"Yeah, this is our town! We can't fight, but the very least we can do is help out!"

The men shouted so vehemently Dida was speechless for a moment.

All of a sudden, a woman ran up from behind him. She yelled at the men carrying the wounded and directed them. "Don't just stand there, hurry up and carry the wounded to the medics! That fellow you've got needs attention right away! Take them over there! Lay that man down right there!"

"H-hey, this isn't a place for women and children." Dida had been watching her with astonishment, but once he came back to his senses, he reached out and grabbed the woman's hand.

“How dare you spout such nonsense when you could use all the help you can get!” The woman glared at him. “I’ll have you know, I’m studying medicine at the academy in the capital! My knowledge could be very useful! You shouldn’t underestimate women and children!”

Once again, Dida was rendered speechless. When his mind started working again, he couldn’t help but laugh out loud despite the situation. Meanwhile, the woman continued to briskly give out orders.

“You’re right...gender has nothing to do with it,” he said softly. His thoughts turned to Iris, who was in the capital of Armelia, as well as Tanya and his other female childhood friends. *Shame on me. I already knew this.*

Each of them had found their paths and worked hard to get where they were today. When he thought about how they had persevered through tough times to achieve their ends, it seemed absolutely ridiculous to judge someone based on their gender. Hadn’t he always thought that? Even now, everyone here was using every bit of their knowledge to support Dida, despite desperately wanting Iris to quickly evacuate and go to the royal capital for her safety.

“Hey, you!” he called to the woman. “I’m sorry. Please take care of these guys. But if you ever feel like you’re in danger, hightail it out of here.”

She flashed him a confident grin. Her smile was so much like Iris’s that he couldn’t help but murmur to himself.

“You remind me of my mistress.”

“Really?! I want to be just like Lady Iris!” The woman heard him even though he said it quietly. Her eyes sparkled at the compliment. “The only reason I was able to study medicine is because of Lady Iris, after all. That’s why I can help out here. I love and respect her so much for giving me these opportunities. I admire her for trying to better the duchy. I hope that I can contribute to society just like she does.” The woman smiled softly. Her eyes, her aura, her entire body overflowed with emotion. “Ah, I’m sorry. I spoke out of turn. If you’ll excuse me.”

In the next moment, that face was replaced with a focused expression as she rushed off toward the medics.

Dida couldn't help but smile as he watched her go. *That woman really does remind me of her.* "All right..." He gave himself a rough smack on the cheek. The panic was gone from his eyes. "Hurry up and change up the front line as fast as possible! And you, let's get you organized!" he yelled toward the volunteers.

"Wh-what?"

"I need the ones who are good with their hands to make something like this." Dida drew a simple diagram in the dirt.

They all gave him skeptical looks. "I mean, sure, we could make it, but...can you really use that?"

"Sure we can! It'll change our lives for the better," Dida responded with a grin.

"O-oh, okay. Hey, hurry up and gather some timber! You guys, get some tools! You over there, gather up rocks!" The men didn't question Dida any further but hurried to carry out his orders.

Later, as night fell, the enemy's troops retired for the night and returned to their camp.

"Dida! Time to eat."

After Dida heard reports from each company's captain, he ordered them to rest and sat at his desk to study a map. Pebbles were spread across the map, along with various things scrawled here and there, traces of his attempts to design various strategies before he scrapped them.

"I'll just put your food here, Dida. Please eat it before it gets cold."

"Do meal rations really get cold...?" Dida muttered, then lifted his gaze to see a plate of hot food. The garrison had only hardtack and preserved canned food, which had come into popular use after Iris sponsored innovations in preserving surplus food. Since it was fast and easy to prepare, the soldiers had been eating those for several days now. "Who in the world made this? That's an awful lot of food."

"The women's volunteer corps."

"Oh...what about the ingredients? Did you pay them back?"

“They said there was no need. They’re sure that if we use up their reserves, Lady Iris will take care of it later, and that as long as we have her, she’ll never let anyone go hungry. They think the most important thing is that we build up our strength to fight off the enemy.”

“Well, that is true.” Dida picked up the plate and set it in front of him, then began to eat. “Ahh, that hits the spot! If only I had some alcohol, it’d be perfect.”

“Don’t get greedy now,” the soldier who’d brought him the food said with an amused laugh.

“Maybe I’ll ask Princess...”

“Er, Dida, I don’t think that’s a good idea...” The soldier was visibly flustered now, prompting a hearty laugh from Dida.

“I’m joking. Seriously, though, I hope the relief troops come soon.”

“Yes. We’ll only be able to last a few more days, at this rate,” the soldier said offhandedly.

“The enemy is having a real ball. We just need to pray they continue to let down their guard.” That didn’t mean Dida had given up. He was trying not to let the anger within him show.

“What makes you think the enemy is having a good time?”

“Think about it: they’ve got a huge advantage when it comes to combat. Instead of sending little squads here and there, they could attack all at once and get it over with, but they’re not.”

“That’s because you’re forcing them to use the narrow roads, Captain...”

“Idiot. Even with that, they’re barely attacking. They’re watching us thinking we’re struggling in vain and enjoying every minute of it. Either that, or they want to hold on to as many troops as they can in order to attack the capital.”

In other words, the enemy was underestimating them. It infuriated Dida. His eyes were full of fire, determined to draw the enemy out, tan their hides, and make it so they never set foot in Armelia again. But it wasn’t going to be easy to overcome their combat disadvantages.

“By the way, Dida, the thing you requested from the volunteer corps is ready.”

“Whoa, really?!” Dida shoveled down the last mouthful, then ran outside. A long wooden barricade, several thick cords of rope, and a huge pile of rocks were laid out for him. “Hey! You did a great job pulling this together in such a short time! Thanks a lot.”

The villagers all wore proud expressions. “Don’t mention it. All we want is to help!”

“Hey, are you sure about this? After this point, I won’t be able to guarantee your safety. Of course we’re going to protect the city as best we can, but who knows what’ll happen. There could be stray arrows. Besides, you never know where the enemy will come from if they invade.”

“Yes, but this is our town.”

Dida looked even more confused when he saw how stoutly they stood.

“This town is our pride. It’s precious to us. It’s become an even better place since Lady Iris became governor. We can’t imagine leaving it.”

“When those people posing as the Boltik family started causing problems, Lady Iris came here herself to fix things! That’s how much she loves our town! If she sent you here to protect it, how could we ever face her again if we ran away?”

“We believe that as long as we have her, we’ll be fine. We just have to trust her. Right now the most important thing is to protect our home, right?”

Dida smiled. Once, long ago, he’d lived in this town as well. Several years had passed since then. Iris had become the governor of the duchy, and this town had changed a great deal since, from the way it looked to the way things were run. Maybe that wasn’t all. Maybe the people’s way of thinking had changed too.

“Yeah? You know that Princess isn’t the governor though, right? She’s the *acting* governor.”

“What? Really?”

“Wait, so one day she won’t be the governor anymore?”

Dida’s quip seemed to leave the volunteers anxious and upset. He had to laugh.

They really do love her, he thought. “All right... Sorry, but can I ask you guys to help again? I want you to put the big shields at the front line. Pass out the rocks to each company.”

“What about the rope?” one of the volunteers asked with curiosity.

“The rope goes with the rocks. We’re gonna hurl ’em at the enemy.”

“Hmm.”

“Go on and get to it.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Oh, and does anyone live over there and there?”

A few of the men stepped forward. “We live in those buildings, yes.”

“Okay. I’ve got a favor to ask you, then.” Dida spoke to them in a low voice.

“S-sure, but...” They looked bewildered but agreed.

Dida smiled at them. “Thanks. They might get damaged, but I’ll send word to Princess and have her pay for repairs.”

He watched the work for a while, then returned to his seat.

“How are they going to fight?” the soldier from before asked Dida as he looked at the scene.

“We’re gonna tease ’em. A lot,” Dida answered plainly. As he spoke, his unabashed will to fight was so intensely visible that the soldier backed up a little.

The next day, Dida called upon the captains of each company. “I have the wooden shields the volunteers made set up in their positions.”

“A-all right, sir. What are we going to do with those shields?” Doubt lingered on some faces.

“Just leave ’em there for now. First, don’t let the enemy come close.”

“So it’s about maintaining our line?”

“That’s right. I want one company each on the top floors of this house and this house. From there, archers will fire as many arrows as they can.”

“Ohh, I see.”

The houses Dida indicated were ones near the port. They were three-story buildings with several windows facing the water.

“We’re not knights. Having to act all proper and follow chivalrous conduct is for chumps. We protect the things that need to be protected, and that’s good enough. Right?”

No one answered Dida aloud, but their hearts were filled with resolve.

“This is that kind of plan. We need to avoid direct combat for as long as we can until the reserves get here, so we’ll focus on chipping away at the enemy’s capabilities.”

“Yes, sir!”

Once the sun rose, the enemy made their move. Just as they had during previous days, they split into several different groups and tried to invade the town. But Dida’s troops were lying in wait on the top floor of those buildings. They attacked. Arrows flew, mercilessly pursuing the enemy soldiers.

“Archers?! Where are the enemies?!”

“O-over there!”

“Up there! Use your shields!”

The enemy raised their shields and kept trying to advance, but then they were attacked from behind with hurled stones. The enemy soldiers couldn’t withstand the barrage of both arrows and rocks. Several of them were bowled over. At the same time, archers at ground level shot toward the enemies whose shields were aimed upward. It didn’t take long for their lines to fall between the arrows coming from two different directions and the rocks from a third.

“Good job. Keep it up. See to it that no one reaches the front.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Dida received reports from each captain, he ran through their situations in his head. Each time his plan required adjustment, he relayed those orders to his men.

At long last, the news he had been waiting for arrived. "Excuse me, sir! Reinforcements have arrived!"

Along with the news came his partner, Lyle. "Sorry we took so long."

"No kidding. Although you did show up sooner than I thought you would," Dida smiled at the sight of him.

"Sorry. So what's going on? Things look pretty interesting out there."

Dida sent someone to fetch the map, then showed it to Lyle. "We've blocked off the main roads from the port to the town here, here, and here. You saw the rest. We were focusing on protecting the city while chipping away at the enemy's capabilities."

"An aggressive defense. How are things by city hall?"

"I could only spare the bare minimum to hold that line. We didn't have enough men."

"That makes sense. Not ideal, though."

"I know. If they make a move, we'll be attacked on both sides. They haven't shown any signs of mobilizing yet, but if they do..."

"Do you want me to divide the men I brought and try to regain control over there?"

"No. Honestly, that would make me too nervous. The enemy is still sending out their vanguard to survey the situation... They're pretending to face off with us, but really they know the situation and are just acting cocky and taunting us. If they seriously mobilize, it won't take long for them to penetrate our defenses."

"Ah, so it hasn't actually started yet. Looks like your harassment is working, though."

"Yep."

“Regardless, you’re still sandwiched.”

As Lyle frowned, a third voice interrupted their conversation. “Can you let me take care of the town hall?”

A guard tried to stop the newcomer, but the man quickly shook him off.

Dida was stunned to see Glaus stride in. “Glaus! What changed your mind?”

He didn’t have to ask how he’d come into their camp—Glaus was the boss of the Boltik family, the gang that held immense power and influence in Eastern Armelia. They knew this land better than anyone, so it would be easy for him to find a way into any camp. Even if he didn’t, his authority would’ve allowed him to talk his way in.

“I want to put an end to the guys who use the Boltik family name, once and for all. Seems what we did last time wasn’t enough, so we need to show ’em what happens when you soil our name.” Glaus shrugged matter-of-factly. Then he scratched his cheek as he spoke with an embarrassed gesture. “And anyway, I really owe your mistress for what she did for me before. Thought I’d go ahead and repay her before my debts snowball even more.”

“Are you sure? We don’t think the guys occupying town hall are your average thugs. We think they’re the vanguard of the Acacian Royal Army,” Lyle warned him.

“Yeah, well, we’ve got our own way of fighting. You guys, don’t worry about a thing. Just focus on protecting the city. Real war’s too much responsibility for us, you know.”

Both Lyle and Dida stared at Glaus. He didn’t try to avoid their piercing gazes but instead responded with a confident grin.

“Honestly, we could use the help. Can we count on you?” Lyle finally replied.

“You’ve got all the help you need, as long as our goals are the same,” Glaus said in a lighthearted tone.

They nodded.

“All right. Go ahead.”

“Got it. You take care of our town, you hear?”

“Yep.”

With that decided, Glaus promptly left. Lyle and Dida turned their focus back to the map and formulated a plan going forward.

After much discussion, they came to a conclusion and Dida confirmed the details. “Is that good?”

“Yes.” Lyle nodded firmly.

The pair left to carry out their promise to Glaus. They were going to protect the brave citizens who stood behind them. Most of all, they were going to protect their mistress’s ideals. They put one foot in front of the other, their fighting spirits quietly burning inside of them.

“I’ve heard reports that we’re running low on medicine in the east. Bring everything we have out of the reserves and gather more from the merchants!”

Things were extremely busy in the capital of Armelia, with my days packed to the brim. I had a responsibility to carry out: to protect the citizens to the east. At the same time, I was responsible for sending Lyle, Dida, and the rest of our forces off to war. Yet I had no means to fight directly to protect them.

However, there were things only I could do, and I had to do everything in my power to carry out those duties. If I were honest, I was so restless I wished I could rush to the battlefield. I was the one in charge and giving orders, so how was it fair that I was safe? Moreover, if I were there, I could get information faster and get things done more quickly!

At the same time, since I was in charge, no one could afford to lose me. If I went to the front line in person, I’d have to take people away from the battle to guard me, which would make even more work for those on the battlefield. I knew that. I still couldn’t help feeling anxious. The situation changed by the minute, and each development had to be dealt with. I didn’t even have time to lose myself in my sympathy as I saw the numbers of wounded come in.

I stared at the documents in my hand. A map of Armelia was spread out across my desk with tactical figures on it. “Have there been any developments since our forces were deployed?”

I had left Lyle and Dida in charge of all decisions on the battlefield. We didn't have a means of instant communication like a telephone, so I'd decided not to intervene because any suggestions I had would be delayed and thus complicate matters even more. Of course I was getting reports on the situation at regular intervals. Despite that, while they were handling the details in the east, I knew they wanted me looking at the overall picture to properly mobilize people and supplies.

I'd left only the bare minimum of Armelia's forces in every territory except the one to the north and sent everyone else to the east.

"Y-yes, my lady. We've maintained the garrison in the north remain per your orders, and the forces ordered to deploy from both the west and the south will arrive in the east within a few days."

I believed in Lyle and Dida's strength. At the same time, I had to consider the possibility that they might have to retreat, and where to go from there. How would the enemy try to invade? If they sent in another wave of troops, how would we deal with that? How would we evacuate the citizens? How could I best deploy our forces? I had to consider all of it and put those thoughts in order.

"That's fine. What about evacuating the citizens? How has that progressed since the last report? Do we have enough food in the locations they're being evacuated to?"

I sent off orders to various officials as I heard each report. They would get in touch with the necessary people, then rush to carry out my orders.

"Yes, my lady. There has been no progress in the evacuation since the last report."

"What? Is there some kind of problem?"

"No, er..." The official who had come to give me the report trailed off. I narrowed my eyes, wondering what in the world could be going on. Finally, he continued with a stern look. "The remaining citizens are saying things like 'This is our town, and we want to protect it' and 'We can't just sit around and do nothing. We want to help Lady Iris.' The young men are running errands and transporting goods, while the women are cooking for the armed forces."

I was stunned by this news. “You...must be joking,” I blurted out in a louder voice than I’d anticipated. Even though this was no time to be moved by emotion, my heart trembled with joy.

“It’s the truth!” I could see now that the official’s mouth was trembling as well.

Now I understood; he had trailed off before because he was trying to suppress his emotions, just as I was. I had a feeling he was thinking the same thing too. Citizens should be protected; they have neither the means nor the power to deal with abuse of authority or violence. The recent natural disaster was a prime example of that. When the floodwaters rose, they were powerless and had been forced to run away...to my domain. I didn’t blame them for it; it had merely been the best option at their disposal. They needed protection because they were too weak to do anything else.

Yet the people who lived in this town had decided to fight. They didn’t give up and run away. They weren’t submissive or obedient. They chose to fight, because that town and this duchy were important to them. They were validating the path that we had chosen to lead them down thus far. That decision and the feelings that went along with it shook me to my core.

“Excuse me, my lady.” Tanya appeared, breaking the silence. “May I give you a report?”

“Y-yes.” My chest felt like it was on fire, and I was still speechless.

She whispered the news in my ear so that the others wouldn’t hear. “This report is from Dida. He says that the Boltik family is cooperating to retake city hall.”

“Wh-what?”

“Glaus said he wanted to take care of the people who were giving the Boltiks a bad name and that he owed you for your prior favors. Now I wonder which one is the real reason and which one is the excuse to cover it up,” Tanya said with a grin.

I was already shocked, and now I’d received another jolt to the heart. I thought of Glaus, whom I’d met before. I almost wanted to laugh, thinking how

utterly characteristic this was of him. He looked like a severe man, but when you talked to him, you soon found that he had a warm, friendly disposition, like an older brother. He was like that because he loved his town, and the people who lived there loved him. I'd thought we would never cross paths again, yet here he was, crossing the line of battle for me.

Several more reports came in after Tanya. Each one moved my heart.

"Excuse me. About the medicine, the merchant guild says they will provide the necessary aid. Here is their official response."

"We just received word that volunteer doctors from the medical guild have mobilized and are on their way to the east. They're requesting that we be ready to receive them and provide a place for them to work."

"The job of a governor is one to take pride in. They protect the citizens, care for them, and enrich their lives. They must feel a deep sense of belonging with their domain in order to oversee their people."

I was reminded of words I'd spoken in front of my officials once. Throughout this entire journey, I'd continuously asked myself if I was making the wrong choice, if I had made a mistake, or whether these changes were really necessary. I had to convince myself that I wasn't mistaken and that these innovations were necessary, because there were no universal answers, and I had no choice but to keep going forward.

But now, the people...my people were giving me answers. Each and every one of them, even though I'd never met the majority. It moved me to tears, and I had to do everything in my power to keep them from overflowing. This was no time to be lost in my feelings.

"Make preparations to receive the doctors at once! They're going to need more than the medical tent they have now to do their work; give me a list of locations that would be good candidates for their base of operations. I want multiple officials sent to the east with bodyguards right away! Give me a list of volunteers as well. Make a rotating schedule for the volunteers on site to follow so no one person is overexerting themselves."

I fired off a series of orders after receiving the latest reports.

“The people have spoken. So we must do everything in our power to protect Armelia and its citizens!”

Every official in the room responded with an enthusiastic, “Yes, my lady!” in perfect unison.

“Hm, I see. So that’s how Lyle and Dida have organized the troops...” Merellis grinned at Shrey’s report. “That means they’ll probably attack tomorrow. We’ll be with them.”

Several men gulped.

“How are we going to attack, specifically?” one asked.

“First, we’re going to aim for the head, so to speak,” she said, still smiling.

Those who understood what she meant were thrown off by her lighthearted tone and casual attitude.

“The head?” one of them blurted out to confirm.

That only made Merellis smile more. Everyone in the room got goosebumps. Her smile was absolutely bewitching, but their chills weren’t because of her beauty. It was because they felt like they had just opened Pandora’s box.

“Yes, that’s right. The enemy’s general. They’ve come from a faraway land. If we cut off the head, they will be most disoriented. That will make it easier for Lyle and Dida to attack, don’t you think?”

“I see...” Shrey, who knew her better than anyone else there, murmured. “How, specifically, will we do it?”

“Fortunately, all the roads leading to the port are occupied by Armelian soldiers. So first, we’ll split this company into four groups and quickly pass them by. We need to strike before the enemies on either side attack. I want you to get past the Armelian forces at full speed, just like how we came here. Then I want you to assemble behind me and follow. I will clear the path for you.”

“Yes, Captain!” they answered in sharp voices, trembling with excitement.

“I want you and your company here. And you and your company here...”

Merellis pointed to different locations on a map, giving out orders without hesitation. Her soldiers nodded at her straightforward commands. “Are there any questions? If not, get to work.”

At her signal, they all rushed to carry out her orders.

“What about you, Shrey?” she asked.

“I have a message for you from Master Pax.”

Merellis gave him a puzzled look.

“Captain...since you have your social standing to think about, he asked me to give you this before battle.” Shrey handed her a mask that would conceal the upper half of her face. It was made of black material but fitted perfectly to the shape of her face, so it wouldn’t fall off easily.

“I swear, he always manages to think of everything.” Merellis took it from him and put it on and took it off several times to test it out. At first, she thought it would be a hindrance, but it didn’t obstruct her vision at all. “Why didn’t he just give it to me directly, though?”

“We left almost as soon as you arrived at House Anderson. He gave it to me beforehand, predicting you would leave abruptly.”

“I see...” Merellis smiled wryly. It was true that things had been hectic before they departed. She’d needed to win the favor of the troops right away so that they could arrive in Armelia as soon as possible. Those thoughts had run through her head while she spoke with Pax, fueling her anxiety. Even if he had brought the mask up, she probably hadn’t been in the right frame of mind to listen to him. “Thank you. I’ll take good care of it.”

“You’re welcome. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” Shrey had successfully delivered his message, and he excused himself.

After Merellis watched him go, she reached for the sword at her hip and took it out. Then she brought it to her forehead, just as she had back at home. Her eyes filled with resolve and readiness. She turned her gaze toward the ocean and gazed at it for a while.

Merellis spent the night with a healthy case of nerves, then rose the next

morning. She was on horseback riding with her men behind her before the sun rose, wearing the mask that Shrey had delivered to her.

“The time has come! Let us claim victory!” she shouted as she charged, her soldiers following behind her.

“Whoa!”

“Wh-what’s going on?”

On the way, Armelian soldiers were shocked by their sudden appearance. While they were confused, they made way for these new soldiers for their own safety.

As soon as they passed the Armelian troops, Merellis unsheathed her sword and charged headfirst into a group of nearby enemy soldiers, cutting through them in a frenzy. It happened so suddenly that they could barely respond. She used this to her advantage and mercilessly penetrated their defenses. The scene was total chaos, but gradually the enemy started to grasp what had happened.

“Surround her!”

“Don’t let her through!”

Enemy soldiers circled Merellis, trying to kill her, but they were swiftly taken care of by her men. Shrey met up with them, watching as if in a trance as she cut through the enemies with ease. It was like Merellis was in her own little world. They were in the same space, but she moved at an entirely different pace, defeating the enemies one by one just as swiftly as she had raced toward Armelia. It was like she didn’t even see the enemies as obstacles in her path.

Shrey had to laugh at the overwhelming difference in martial prowess between her and her enemies, as well as at her display of sheer power. It felt like he was watching a re-enactment of a heroic legend from a book of fairy tales.

Blood flew everywhere. The raw crimson scene almost looked like it existed to color her. She was so fierce and beautiful. The men riding behind her were consumed and inspired by the sight. It made their blood sing, so much that they could hardly stand it. Their primal instincts called on them to sharpen their

fangs and to use them to tear through the throats of their enemies—to not lag behind their captain.

“I think as soon as they see how you fight, all their nerves will disappear.”

Shrey had been right to say it. It didn't matter whether a soldier was a rookie or a veteran, they were one unit, awestruck by the sight of their captain's prowess in battle, proud to call her their leader. As the battle wore on, more and more soldiers were injured. But no one stopped. It was almost as if they were drunk on the moment—they forgot their pain and continued following their captain.

“Keep going! Don't lag behind the captain! Tighten your ranks and protect each other!” Shrey howled.

He was answered by a hearty cry of “Yes, sir!”

Even the enemy soldiers were overwhelmed at the sight of Merellis's fighting and her command of the men at her heels. Some tried to move, but it was almost like they were glued to the spot. One enemy soldier murmured, “It's almost like they're being commanded by a demon...”

Merellis and her soldiers were a fearsome sight indeed.

She rode past the soldiers to an open section of the battleground. A luxurious carpet was spread there, looking quite out of place, and on top of it was an even more luxurious chair. It was clear that this space was meant for someone of high social standing. When Merellis appeared before it, covered in blood, those waiting upon it let out a scream. She did not react. She calmly strode to the center of the open ground, mercilessly cutting down anyone who stood in her way, until she stood before the man who sat upon the luxurious chair.

He was plump, and he didn't move a muscle as she approached. To be more accurate, he *couldn't* move a muscle. She was such a fearsome sight, he felt as if he had been visited by the Goddess of Death, ready to deliver that titular fate with a single strike of her sword.

In the next moment, a sword flew between the man and Merellis. She showed no sign of surprise. “You're late,” she murmured.

Of course, this wasn't directed toward the enemy who sat before her.

“I’m sorry.”

She was speaking to Lyle, whose blade was aimed at the enemy general. Behind him were the Armelian forces he’d brought, who’d been waiting in the direction opposite of the ones she’d charged past.

“You’re just too fast,” he said. “Honestly, I wasn’t sure I was going to make it in time.”

“But it was easy, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was. Coming at the enemy from two different directions truly confused them. I can’t believe you knew which direction I’d be coming from, though.”

“I had a hunch, once I saw where your troops were positioned. There were fewer men in that direction compared to the way I came.” Merellis had anticipated Lyle’s actions and moved to provide him with backup. She had timed her charge perfectly with his, but coming from the opposite direction in order to further confuse the enemy. “I knew you would come. I was going to take his head whether you did or not, though.”

Ultimately, the Armelian forces under the leadership of Dida and Lyle had the power of command. Merellis knew it was best if they were the ones to make the most important moves, since they were in Armelia’s territory. Even so, if Lyle had arrived late, she would have had no qualms about ending things herself. It wasn’t because she had some greater ambitions but merely that she thought it best to put an end to the situation as soon as possible. Once the enemy’s reserve troops showed up, Armelia would be at even more of a disadvantage. If that happened, neither her strength nor that of House Anderson’s guards would matter; making up for that disparity would be incredibly difficult.

“At any rate, it’s time to question him.” Lyle’s gaze grew sharp as he looked at the man who appeared to be the enemy’s general. That simple look made the man let out a shriek. “Who are you?”

The man’s eyes darted left and right. No one came to his aid, because anyone who was capable of doing so had already been cut down by Merellis or Lyle. Those remaining shifted their gazes anxiously to avoid eye contact. After all,

Lyle had his sword pointed at the man and was essentially holding him hostage—what could they possibly do?

Lyle pressed his blade against the man's neck. A line of crimson appeared and dripped down his skin.

"He's asking you who you are and where you came from," Merellis translated into Acacian. "Answer truthfully."

"Y-you know Acacian?!" the man responded.

"A little. So? Who are you?"

"I-I'm the first prince of Acacia, Jalaal Bent Acacia!"

"What? You're the first prince?"

Lyle could only hear her interpretation, but strangely he guessed what she had just said. Neither of them could hide their bewilderment. "Surely that's not true," he said. "Shouldn't the first prince have far more guards? Moreover, who in their right mind would send a first prince to war?"

"I've never even heard of a kingdom sending their first prince to another kingdom with the vanguard!" Merellis said.

For a moment, Lyle thought, *I've never heard of the wife of a duke leading the vanguard and charging into battle either.* But he shifted his attention back to the moment at hand.

"Do you have any idea what will happen to you if you hurt me?" The man calling himself the first prince had completely changed his tune from that first terrified shriek. He smirked at them confidently.

"Why did you invade?"

"His Majesty made a deal with the kingdom of Tweil. After the war, the kingdom of Acacia will take over Armelia and its surrounding territories, and Tweil will get the rest. I was sent with the vanguard as proof of our commitment."

Lyle frowned. He'd had a hunch that was it. His mistress had feared this very arrangement all along, and now it was reality. His head hurt just thinking about what was to come.

“I see,” Merellis responded plainly by his side. Her tone was matter-of-fact, as if she’d heard everything she needed to and that was that. “Lyle, regardless of whether it’s the truth, this man is definitely a member of the royal family. We must wait to have his head, but we’ll take him with us for now. We might be able to use him as leverage in negotiations.”

Lyle acted swiftly. He brandished his sword and sliced through the tendons in the man’s foot, prompting him to let out a blood-curdling scream. “Don’t tell me you really thought you were going to get away unscathed after everything you’ve done?” he asked as he glared. “You need to feel a *little* of the pain you’ve caused.”

Merellis watched with amusement and looked down at the man, who was shedding tears and moaning with pain. “You heard him. Don’t worry, we won’t kill you. You should be grateful for that royal status of yours. Now you’re going to help us out.”

Lyle stuffed a piece of cloth into the man’s mouth and tied him up, then threw him over his shoulder. “I doubt he’ll try to kill himself, but we’ll leave him tied up, just in case.”

“True. Who cares if he does, though? He’s annoying,” Merellis responded casually.

“How did you know he’s a member of the royal family, though?”

“The ring on his right middle finger. In Acacia, every member of the royal family is given a symbol, and they have their symbols carved into rings. I remember seeing this one before, although I never expected to see it on the battlefield.” Just as Merellis said, the man wore a golden ring on his middle finger. There was no gem set in the center but instead the carving of a bull.

“Hm, I see. May I take him home with me, Lady Mer?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll provide backup. To be honest, I still haven’t gotten my fill of battle.”

Lyle chuckled until a grave look came over his face. “Clear everyone from this place! Now that we have their master, the enemy will be a disorderly mob!”

They were in possession of the first prince and had dealt another severe blow

to the already confused enemy. Lyle led the Armelian force as they steadily cut down the remaining enemy troops, one by one. They did so with ruthless efficiency.

Behind him, Merellis led House Anderson's guard and took out all who remained, leaving carnage in their wake. In fact, Merellis fought so fiercely that the Armelian soldiers had to wonder if she had been holding back when she'd charged through the enemy lines earlier. Blood splattered everywhere; she seemed determined to do one thing and one thing only—destroy the enemy.

Since she had so inspired the Anderson guard, they fought with all their might. As a result, the majority of the enemy troops barely put up a fight before they were laid out on the ground. Of course, the fact that their leader had been captured was a large factor in that. Furthermore, Dida entered the fray.

Thanks to all of those factors, the war within Armelia's borders was soon over.

I was sitting in front of a mountain of documents on my desk, praying. I had to raise funds, then use those funds to procure the goods needed in each territory, send the goods there, and send people to distribute the goods. It sounded simple enough seeing it all written down, but in order to accomplish all of those things, I had to look at the duchy as a whole and consider all possible problems that could arise, then formulate a plan to deal with those hypothetical problems. That meant that everyone, including the Armelian officials and myself, were up to our eyeballs in work. No one uttered a single complaint. We knew that our work made it easier for our allies to do what they needed to do. Most of all, though, the people of Armelia were also doing everything they could to help us fight. There was no way any of us were going to complain.

Truthfully, I think we were all too worried to get any rest in the first place. We worried over the safety of those fighting on the front line, the lives of the citizens who had stayed behind to help, and the state of the work itself. The more I thought about it, the more my thoughts turned toward the negative. My worries were endless, and anxiety ruled my mind.

But I couldn't drown in it. I had vowed that to myself, yet the road ahead was

dark and intensely frightening. If I let my guard down, I would be swept up in those negative thoughts and be lost to them. I was trying to think rationally about everything I could do in each of those situations to cope with these fears, but my heart just wouldn't keep up. The weight of being responsible for so many lives during these dark times made it difficult to keep moving forward.

I couldn't help but think how easy it would be to squeeze my eyes shut, cover my ears, and curl up into a little ball on the floor. Every time I considered that, I thought back to everything I'd gone through to get here. It hadn't been easy. It hadn't been all good times. I'd stumbled, worried, cried, been angry. All of that made the happy times even brighter. If I gave up here, everything I'd been through would be a waste.

So as I sat at my desk, from time to time, I looked up to the ceiling and prayed. I prayed for everyone's safety, and for peace to return to the kingdom. Honestly, I wasn't sure who I was praying to. All I knew was that I had to.

"Excuse me, my lady!" Tanya burst into the room, which was quite unusual for her.

"What is it, Tanya?"

"They're here! They crushed the Royal Acacian Army! They've also captured a large number of prisoners of war, including the first prince of Acacia. Also, the Boltik family successfully recaptured city hall!"

For a moment, my mind went completely blank. I was so relieved that I thought I might collapse.

"My lady!" Tanya rushed forward to support me. The feeling of her warmth and the shock to my body told me that I wasn't dreaming. I let out all the air in my lungs, and my vision blurred.

"I'm so glad! I'm so, so glad!"

"I know... I know... You worked so hard, my lady." Tanya's soft smile made my vision blur even further.

"Thank you, Tanya." I placed my hands on my desk and stood. "I am grateful beyond words for you, who stuck by my side, and for the people of Armelia."

Tanya smiled, pleased.

“I must secure a place to keep the prisoners. I need to decide how to deal with them.” I instantly started thinking of everything I needed to do.

“My lady, please at least take the day off.” Tanya had a troubled expression.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Tanya! We must get everything ready so that when they come home—when the heroes of Armelia come home—we can share this happiness with them. And so we can mourn the lives that were sacrificed for our cause.” Those were my honest feelings, and once I explained them to her, she nodded with a smile and relented.

I made the necessary preparations over the next few days as we waited for them to come home. Once the Armelian officials heard about the victory against the Acacian army and that we had recaptured city hall, the atmosphere in the mansion became much less tense.

However, Tasmeria was still at war with Tweil. Although the mood wasn’t as somber as before, the officials remained nervous as the days ticked by. I felt the same way. I wasn’t sure what to do if Tasmeria lost the war. If they did, I was certain that Acacia would strike again.

“How is the war going, Tanya?”

“His Highness is commanding troops in the former Lord Monroe’s domain. The people’s distrust toward Tasmeria is strong, so word is that the battle is grueling.”

I froze. “I had no idea, Tanya.” I couldn’t conceal the anger in my voice.

“I’m sorry. I thought that as you needed to prioritize the fight against Acacia in the east, I should keep it to myself.”

“It’s all right. I’m sorry too. Even if you had told me then, I probably wouldn’t have had the presence of mind to truly hear you. But Tanya, I want to know about what’s going on in the north no matter how busy I get.” I felt bad for growing emotional. It seemed I still had a long way to go, if I was reacting this strongly to any mention of “His Highness.” “The battle is grueling, is it? I suppose that’s only to be expected—it’s war, after all. Such things aren’t ever simple.”

“That’s right. Not only do the people in Monroe’s domain sympathize with Tweil, but if we fight a losing battle against them, it will only exacerbate their distrust.”

I couldn’t believe the prince had headed to battle. I wondered if he was safe. I *prayed* that he would be safe. It was frustrating to not know his circumstances because he was so far away. My heart was filled with a restless anxiety. I wanted to be with him. I wanted to help him. These were the screams coming from deep inside my heart.

My common sense reined in those desires. I forced my thoughts to another matter in order to silence the voice completely. “Do you have any reports from your agents on the ground in Acacia?”

“Apparently, the citizens of Acacia were not informed of the attack on Armelia. There has been no other significant action on the part of the Royal Acacian Army either.”

“I see. What in the world is their king thinking?” The more I thought, the angrier I became. Even though the king hadn’t asked for my hand in marriage, his son had, so how dare they attack us? He’d offered his right hand for a friendly handshake while stabbing me in the back with his left. “Nevertheless, I’m glad their army hasn’t made a move.”

After all, there was no way the duchy could endure a sustained attack levied by an entire kingdom. We didn’t have the people, supplies, or anything else for that matter. That wasn’t just the case for Armelia but for all of Tasmeria as well.

“Indeed,” Tanya agreed with a pained expression.

“What about the investigation into affairs within the royal family?”

“The king has many wives, as well as five concubines, so there are six princes and ten princesses. The prince who proposed to you is the third prince, Khadir. The king is elderly, so a battle to assume the position of rightful heir has been ongoing behind the scenes. However, there are rumors that Khadir has no interest in government, as he’s made no move to claim the throne. The second prince is sickly and of weak constitution, so he has voluntarily ceded his right to inherit. Even so, people say that although Khadir is the third prince, he’s the least likely to become king.”

“It seems that the battle for succession rages in every kingdom,” I said sarcastically. “He’s the least likely to become king, hm? Honestly, I don’t think that’s true at all.”

“Why do you think that?”

“It’s just the impression I got from our meeting.”

“So it’s a gut feeling, then?”

“Not quite. When he came to Armelia, he came as a representative of his kingdom. So putting those two things together...”

Tanya’s face lit up with understanding as she realized what I was getting at. Being an emissary for your kingdom meant you were presenting yourself as the *face* of that kingdom. Someone who didn’t care about their kingdom wouldn’t do that, because doing so meant bearing the responsibility of protecting the kingdom’s honor; one misstep and you could profoundly damage its reputation. Considering Khadir was the third prince, he certainly could have traveled with a delegation group and had someone attend to the representative duties in his place, but he hadn’t.

“Not interested in the government? Hasn’t made a move to claim the throne? That’s just how it seems to everyone else. The public opinion. If he’s acting as an emissary and involved in the government in similar ways, then he must have a very powerful pawn on his side. Someone who will do everything in their power to help him and to make sure that whatever he’s plotting behind the scenes doesn’t become public knowledge.”

I let out an inward chuckle, thinking that it certainly sounded like someone else I knew. The third prince was only refraining from making a move *on the surface*, while steadily gaining ground behind the scenes. The person this reminded me of was my own mother.

Khadir sounded like he was doing the same thing. He didn’t want to draw too much attention, so he was keeping his sharp fangs hidden. “So, I think there’s a good chance that he *is* reaching for the crown.”

Suddenly, my line of thought fell off track. In that case, wouldn’t there be very little advantage in marrying me? Wouldn’t it benefit him more to marry

someone from a powerful family in his own kingdom, who could help him gain more ground? If we had children, then someone with Tasmerian blood would inherit the crown. Surely the powerful people in Acacia would object. Or perhaps he just wanted me as a wife in name only, and he would have an heir by another wife. I got that far before I let out a sigh and realized it was pointless to try to figure it all out.

“Let’s keep a close eye on him going forward,” I said.

“Yes, my lady.”

Just then, there was a knock at the door, and Sebastian entered. “My lady, Lyle and Dida have returned from the east.”

“Thank goodness! I know they must be exhausted, but could you ask them to come in and brief me?”

“They were already planning to, after they finished giving final commands to the troops.”

“I see. All right, then. Thank you, Sebastian.”

Some time after that, there was another knock at the door. I told them to come inside and watched as Lyle, Dida, and my mother entered the room.

“Mother?!” I was so surprised to see her I practically yelled.

“It’s so good to see you again, Iris.”

Luckily no one else was here to witness my little outburst. “What are you doing here?”

At last I put it all together. My mother had left with House Anderson’s guard more than a week ago. I hadn’t heard one thing about what happened on that front. I had been so busy with everything else that I hadn’t had time to even think.

“Wait, Mother, don’t tell me you went along with House Anderson’s guard to the east?!” I was well aware of how crazy it sounded. Then I remembered what she’d said before. She had told me that if there was any trouble, to make sure to call on her at once.

“I didn’t ‘go along’ with them, exactly. I led them there.”

So that is what happened! I thought, bewildered. After all, who could have predicted that my mother would have gone to the battlefield herself? “A-are you hurt? I mean, how did you—why did you...”

Lyle and Tanya were laughing. I had no idea what was so funny.

“Princess, your mother is incredibly skilled with a sword,” Dida said. “She’s far stronger than any of us.”

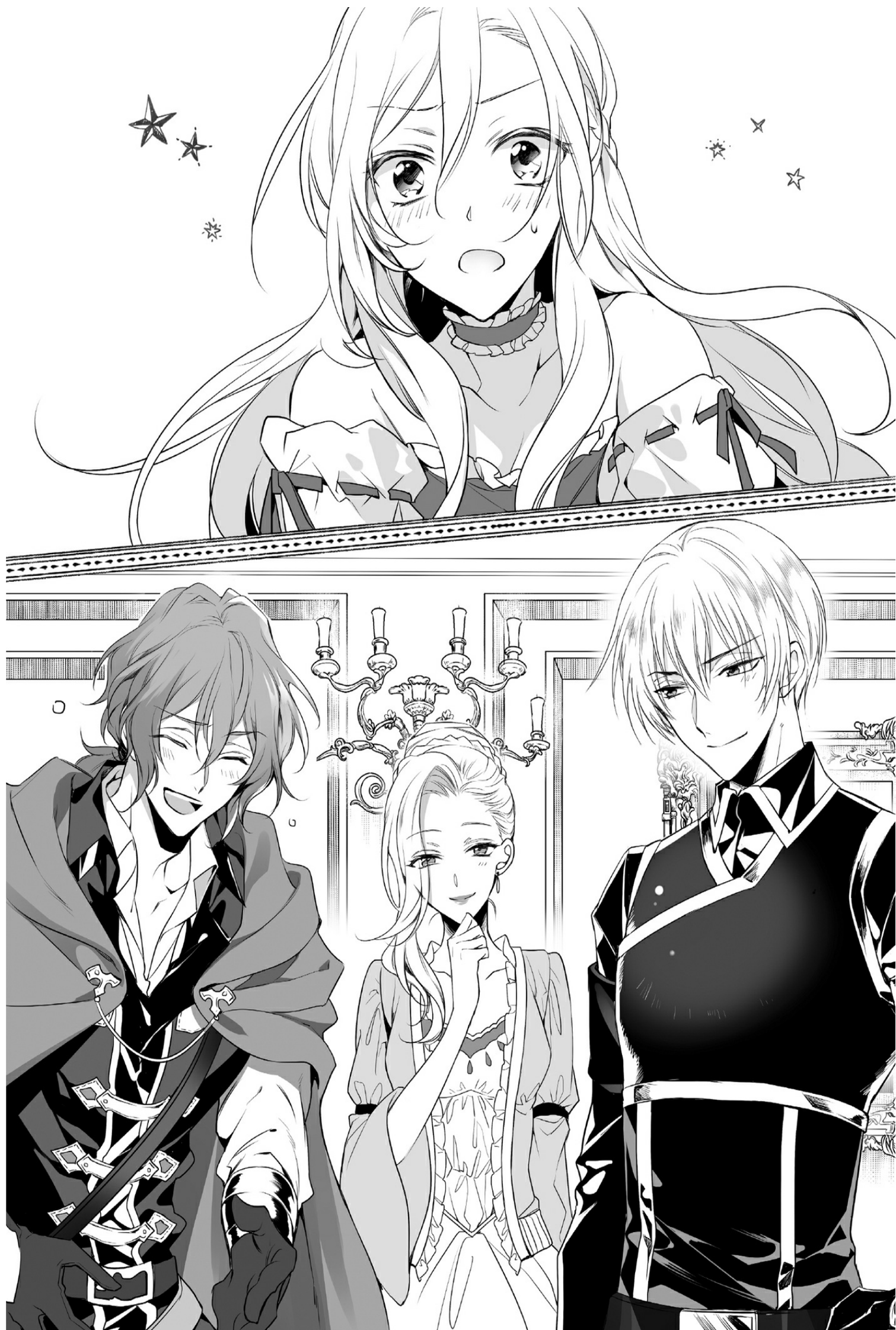
“Huh?!” What in the world was he thinking, making jokes like that?

“Pains me to admit it, but he’s right,” Lyle went ahead and agreed. “She’s also a top-notch commander.”

My mind went completely blank for a moment.

“It’s something I learned when I was young,” my mother said with a little smile. “Don’t you remember what I told you before, Iris? I wanted to be a soldier, so I asked my father to train alongside his men. I have a little experience on the battlefield.”

That was the final nail in the coffin. What in the world did she mean by this “little experience”?



My mind was a confused mess, one question rising after another. As I stared at my mother's smile, I realized none of it really mattered, and I gradually regained my composure. "I see. I want to thank you and the House Anderson guard from the bottom of my heart for your efforts in protecting the people of Armelia."

"Iris, you don't need to thank me. After all, I'm a member of House Armelia too. But I'll go ahead and relay the message to House Anderson."

"Thank you." I bowed my head once again to my mother, then turned toward Lyle and Dida. "I'm so grateful to you and the rest of the troops who traveled to the east. And I'm so, so relieved that you came home safely."

Of course I'd heard the news that they had claimed victory and were safe. But seeing them in front of me filled me with emotion once again, and my eyes blurred with tears.

"I'm so glad I have you. I can't thank you enough for supporting me." Even though there were many more things I wanted to tell them, I just couldn't find the words. It was frustrating to be unable to express my feelings.

"We don't deserve such praise," Lyle said with a soft smile.

"Your words are reward enough, Princess," Dida said in an easy voice, making me laugh.

"Thank you... There are so many things I want to ask you, but first I'd like to hear your reports."

They told me the number of enemy prisoners they'd captured and how many of their comrades had been wounded. Although I'd known this beforehand thanks to an express message on horseback, I found myself wondering if the facilities and supplies I'd prepared would be sufficient.

"Another thing, my lady, is that we captured their leader on the ground."

"And he's the first prince of Acacia."

My mother's words sent a shock wave through my heart.

"What? They sent the first prince to the front line?" Honestly, my first reaction was sheer disbelief. Of course I had no reason not to trust my mother,

but I had a hard time accepting it because it defied all operative norms. Why would a kingdom send a member of the royal family to fight in the vanguard when invading another kingdom, let alone the first prince? As I questioned this logic out loud, an idea popped into my head. “Ohh. What if...?”

My mother noticed my reaction. “Do you have some insight?”

“Yes... Yes, I do.”

“Tell me, Iris. I think it’s in our best interests to discuss our opinions on the matter and work together.”

“You’re right. Well, the one that proposed to me was Khadir, the third prince. Right now, there’s a battle for succession behind the scenes in Acacia, just as there was here. So I have to imagine the first prince is also fighting for his right to the throne.”

“You certainly seem knowledgeable about Acacia! So?”

“So, the second prince is sickly and weak, so he’s voluntarily ceded his rights to the crown. In other words, if ‘something’ happens to the first prince, the throne is Khadir’s for the taking.”

“My lady... Do you think that Khadir plotted the attack against us?” Tanya asked, but I shook my head.

“I don’t know. Who conspired with Tweil to attack us, the current king or Khadir? I’m not sure. There *is* one thing I’m certain of, and it’s that Khadir intended for this war to end his own battle for succession so that he could swiftly claim the throne for himself.”

“According to the first prince, the current king was the one who made arrangements with Tweil,” my mother replied.

“I see. Well then, we might have a chance to negotiate with them, if Khadir does try to steal the crown himself.”

“But my lady, if he asked for your hand in marriage, then he must want this land for himself,” said Tanya. “If so, should he become the next king, he could attack us again but with the entire Acacian Royal Army at his command.”

“Well, I’m not sure about the current king, but if I were in Prince Khadir’s

position, I wouldn't need Armelia."

"Why is that?"

"Because regardless of whether Tasmeria or Tweil wins, it would be extraordinarily difficult for him to control Armelia. It isn't connected to Acacia by land, and it would be surrounded by another kingdom on all sides. Perhaps he's made some secret deal with Tweil, but that will eventually fall apart due to geographic factors. Think about it. You must cross the sea to reach Acacia. If another kingdom attacked Armelia, they would be unable to respond immediately, and the costs to ship soldiers and supplies would be astronomical. Overall, they would have very little to gain from the arrangement. I think it would be far more beneficial to let us remain a foreign kingdom and keep us as a good trade partner."

"I see. Whether or not that's crossed Khadir's mind, I think you're right, Iris. Unfortunately, they chose to join forces with Tweil this time. We don't know Khadir's thoughts, but if he really is using this situation in a bid to become king, then we might be able to negotiate, if he thinks our cooperation would yield an advantage."

"You're right, Mother."

"Very well. At any rate, I think that the House Anderson guard and I should remain in Armelia for the time being. The wounded soldiers need to recuperate, and we can keep an eye on the situation until they do. If anything happens, I will mobilize my forces, so don't hesitate to let me know."

I nodded to this suggestion. To be honest, it was highly reassuring to have her with me. "Tanya, get things in order so we can question the first prince."

"Yes, my lady."

The news that Armelia had successfully defeated the Royal Acacian Army spread like wildfire and reached the capital in no time.

"Well, at least that's one thing we don't have to worry about anymore. Right, Berne?" Leticia stole a glance at him as he walked down the hallway behind her.

“Yes, certainly. However, there’s no guarantee that they won’t try to attack again, so we can’t let down our guard.”

“That’s true. The war with Tweil is yet undecided on the front, so it would be difficult to spare more soldiers or supplies for Armelia. If a second wave comes, it will be up to Armelia to stave them off. It’s a shame, but that’s the reality of our situation.” Leticia let out a heavy sigh.

Berne’s expression tightened. “Are things really that bad?”

“Yes. The supply situation in particular is most dire. Fortunately, we were able to avoid catastrophe thanks to the supplies my brother arranged for distribution to each territory, but we have barely any surplus. War is incredibly expensive and leads to likewise incredible consumption. Even if we could spare the soldiers, under no circumstances could we provide the supplies and money required to fight a war on two fronts.”

Now it was Berne’s turn to let out a heavy sigh. Although he was a member of House Armelia, at the same time, he was beholden to the kingdom’s government. Even if his family was in a bind, he wasn’t in a position to go to them. Moreover, his job wouldn’t allow him to prioritize Armelia over any other domain. It would set a terrible precedent for those of other houses. He had been trying to discern a means by which to assist them in the kingdom while still staying within the bounds of the law, but reality was unforgiving.

“On the other hand, Armelia is truly amazing. Not only did they keep up with my brother’s selfish demands in the midst of a natural disaster, but they continued to support people who went to Armelia to settle there. Now they’ve overcome this predicament too.”

“That’s right. This is why I so admire my sister and the people she surrounds herself with.”

“Absolutely... I’m not sure how the people of Armelia feel, but speaking from the kingdom’s point of view regarding supplies and manpower, I hope they resolve everything quickly. I’m considering searching for something she could use as common ground in her negotiations with Acacia.”

“I’m sure my sister wants things resolved as soon as possible too. She’s using an intermediary to set up just such a discussion.”

“Goodness. Well, I suppose I should expect nothing less from Iris. Rudy, what do you think?”

Rudius said, “I’m concerned about how she intends to engage Acacia, who she’ll send to do the negotiations, and whether she will be able to successfully negotiate a cease-fire.”

“The typical protocol in the past has been to assemble a team of officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Law and send them to negotiate,” said Berne. “As for the content of the negotiations, since we don’t know much about the state of Acacia’s internal affairs, it would be necessary to start there.”

“That will be difficult,” said Rudius. “Their kingdom is aware of the natural disaster that occurred here and also that we’re at war with Tweil. She should have a certain amount of knowledge of the kingdom’s internal affairs, so I think there’s an extremely high chance that she’ll find a foothold there.”

“Hm, I suppose you’re right,” Leticia piped up in their grave conversation. “Just so both of you know, I intended to let Armelia handle this matter entirely by themselves all along. Of course, I’ll confer with or notify my brother before I write any manner of official letters.”

Berne couldn’t hide his surprise. “But this is an international decision. How can a duke’s family handle that alone? I’m sure there will be backlash from other houses as well...”

Rudius also objected. “If she’s going to sit down and negotiate with Acacia, wouldn’t it be important for her to do so in the kingdom’s name? Moreover, don’t you think they’d need an experienced spy to acquire the information they need in order to have leverage during the negotiations?”

“You don’t think someone as capable as Iris has someone like that? First of all, she’s already met someone from the Acacian royal family, and he proposed to her. I think she can use that connection to gain the advantage. Second, Armelia makes a great deal of money trading with Acacia. Therefore, I believe Acacia will deal with them like they’d deal with any kingdom. Third, Milo told me for a fact that Iris has a personal spy, and according to him, a very capable one. I have a feeling that she has already ordered them to gather all the intelligence they can on Acacian internal affairs. She might even have ordered that before

the attack, right after that prince proposed. So, she'll be able to negotiate much sooner acting on that information rather than waiting for aid from our corner.

"Fourth, and this is the most important point, what do you imagine would happen if the kingdom acted at this late stage? Armelia has already come this far on their own, so why would we charge onto the scene with barely any preparation, with a subpar understanding of the situation? We'd complicate the matter further. Besides, I have a feeling that House Armelia—and likely the Armelian people—would object. As such, I believe that the quickest way to solve this predicament will be to leave Armelia to deal with it on their own."

The two men listened silently as Leticia rattled off her reasoning, and they both began to lean toward acceptance.

"As for other houses pushing back... What could they even say at this point? Armelia is extremely wealthy, has talented people working for it, and has the military strength to fight off another kingdom's army, even if it *was* just the vanguard." Leticia let out a sigh. "I understand that you two are blood-related to House Armelia, but since I trust you, I can tell you this: In truth, the royal family is wary of the power Armelia has amassed."

Both men jolted slightly with surprise.

"House Armelia has always enjoyed a great deal of power among the nobility, even since the queen dowager—Grandmother—was in power. The royal family was wary of them at that time as well. Simultaneously, House Armelia has always been the picture of how a noble family ought to conduct themselves. They understood the true responsibility of the aristocracy, and they've served the kingdom in many ways. That was why the royal family has always turned a blind eye to their duchy."

"Perhaps it's difficult to answer this question since it's coming from me, but I'd like to ask it anyway. Are you thinking of taking measures to reduce Armelia's power?" Berne asked.

Leticia smiled at him wryly. "Of course not. The opposite, actually. Armelia has become too big. That's why we need to decide what accommodations we can make for them so they don't decide to secede."

Neither Berne nor Rudius were expecting that answer, and they both looked

quite surprised.

“Armelia has already suffered a great deal because of the policies my brother and Ellia put forth. Instead of being a protected arm of the kingdom, they were treated like an enemy and forced to surrender valuable supplies. Honestly, if I were Iris, I’d regard Tasmeria as nothing but a thorn in my side. With Armelia’s wealth, societal foundations, and future possibilities, they could without a doubt amass the power to defeat the kingdom. We need Armelia, but without us, why, they’d thrive. This is the balance of power as it stands. The problem is that a number of nobles don’t yet understand that.”

“Your Highness... I swear that House Armelia has no intention of revolting against the kingdom.”

“I know, Berne. I recognize your and Lord Armelia’s distinguished service. It’s clear that the two of you have worked to give all you have to this kingdom. That’s why I have no doubts about House Armelia. I’m speaking purely from the standpoint of the power structure.”

Berne and Rudius were speechless.

“If we push them with the kingdom’s demands and constraints and the relationship breaks down, the kingdom will lose a guaranteed source of income from taxes, as well as valuable territory. It would be absurd to try to take away Armelia’s power. If we did, the Armelian citizens would surely revolt. I understand that it’s a double-edged sword, but Armelia has better laws, taxes, and standards of living than the other domains, and perhaps even the capital. It would be lovely if we could implement those same things in the capital, but I think it would be difficult to bring about that reality. So, instead of making things worse for the people in Armelia, I think it would be wiser for the kingdom to give them more discretionary powers—to an extent.”

This time, neither of the men raised an objection.

“Well, we’re almost there,” said Leticia.

“Why are we going to the tower, anyway?” Rudius asked.

Leticia answered him with a grin. “To see one of the endings to this story. Either it will all work out for the victors, or someone will slip up and it’ll be

necessary to course correct so things don't get off track."

Rudius and Berne looked confused.

"Rudy, the reason my brother asked you to stay behind was because this is such an important job. Are you ready for it?" Leticia asked with a quiet smile.

There was an unfathomable intensity in that smile. As she said, under normal circumstances, Rudius would have accompanied Alfred to battle as his closest bodyguard and advisor, yet Alfred had ordered him to stay in the capital. No matter how Rudy had pleaded to go with him, Alfred would not relent.

"You'll understand when the time comes. I trust you more than anyone, and that's why I've asked you to stay," Alfred had told him before he left.

"I've been ready. I don't carry this sword as a decoration, but with the resolve to use it when necessary."

"I see. Berne, you must never speak a word to anyone about what you are about to see. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

Leticia led the way to a certain room. It seemed to be an ordinary room, with bookshelves lining one wall. "There are many secret passageways in the royal castle. This is one of them. It's necessary that I bring you two with me today, which is why I'm showing it to you. You must never tell another soul."

They nodded.

Satisfied, Leticia pulled out one of the books from a shelf, then pushed a hidden button behind it. Suddenly, the bookcase swung out like a door. "Let's go." She entered the secret room and began walking down the dark staircase. "The royal family has a long past with many dark secrets. They used these hidden rooms and passageways to conceal their actions and go where others couldn't. That's where we're headed."

They came to the end of the stairway, and she led them down a hallway farther into the darkness. At the end of the short corridor was another set of stairs, which led up.

"There's a large stone—the third one from the right. Push it upward."

When they reached the top of the stairs, they came to what appeared to be a dead end. Rudius switched places with Leticia and pushed the stone upward according to her instructions. Suddenly, a light shone from above.

Rudius went through the door and found himself in a small room made of stone with a thick door and a narrow, spiral staircase.

“We’re almost there. We just need to go up a little more.” Leticia led the way again and began to climb the stairs.

“Wait... Are we inside the tower?” Berne asked in a sober tone.

“Yes, that’s right. This tower is where nobles are imprisoned when convicted of criminal behavior. I have no idea why there’s another door besides the entrance considering what it’s used for, but that is neither here nor there. Regardless, as I said before, this was created for the royal family to carry out their business away from prying eyes,” Leticia said with a wry smile. She looked a bit fatigued from climbing all the stairs.

Finally, they arrived at the top of the spiral staircase to a small room. Leticia signaled Rudius to remove a stone from the wall. He took it out, revealing a peephole of sorts to see past the wall. The three of them huddled together and peered through the opening.

On the other side of the wall was a room surrounded by iron bars. Inside the room, looking very glum indeed, was Yuri Neuer.

“Princess, Leticia, that’s—” Berne blurted out, unable to contain his shock.

Leticia silenced him with a firm “*Shh!*”

The trio silently observed the room for a while. Then there was a sudden noise, a rush of footsteps. Who should appear next but Prince Edward, who was supposedly locked up in another cell.

“Yuri! I came to save you!” he said with all the love in his heart as he approached the cell.

Yuri stared absently at him. “How did you get here?” she asked in a flat voice.

“This person freed me! Just you wait, I’m going to get you out of there!”

A man dressed in fine clothes waited behind Edward. Berne and Rudius’s eyes

widened when they saw him, because they recognized him at once.

The man belonged to the second prince's faction, but since he had not been directly involved in the counterfeit gold coin conspiracy, he had received the relatively light punishment of forfeiture of his title of head of house and house arrest. Behind him stood two knights who were supposed to be guarding the entrance to the tower.

"Stop." Yuri looked down coldly at Edward, who was crouching over to open the jail cell. He opened the door and looked up at her in surprise.

"What's wrong, Yuri? There's nothing to fear. After we escape from this place, this fellow and other like-minded folk will give us safe harbor. We'll lay low for a while, and when the time is right, I shall take my place as the next king."

Edward's cheerful tone of voice did nothing to brighten the dark look on Yuri's face.

Instead, she snorted with laughter, exasperated. "Don't you understand? He has no intention of helping me."

"I know it's hard to believe, Yuri. First, let's get you out of there and..."

"If I leave this place, I'll be killed. By him and his cronies."

"Yuri, that's not true! They're here to help us! Come on, let's just go. Please trust me."

"They need *you*, because they can use you. Their only chance at regaining their power is to put you on a pedestal. I'm different. I'm nothing but a threat. They're afraid that I'll tell everyone of their connections to Tweil. Even if you were able to take the throne, a child of mine wouldn't be able to succeed."

"Yuri, that doesn't make any sense. Even if, by some slim possibility, there was a chance that they saw you as a threat, why would they put themselves in danger to save you?"

"Because this is their only chance. They want to rid themselves of their fear that someone will spill their secrets to Alfred, and they want to do it before you can succeed the throne. Don't you think their best chance to do so is when you're relying on them to hide us?" Yuri spoke confidently and with a cold

sneer. “Not to mention, there’s no need for someone from this hopeless kingdom to save me. Its days are numbered. Well, in any case there are other knights out there to save me.”

One of the men standing behind Edward laughed out loud. “Did you hear that, Prince Edward? I really wanted to help save your beloved fiancée, but as I suspected, she’s allied with Tweil. She is unworthy of Your Highness.”

“That’s not true! She’s just suffering the mental pressure of having been locked up here. Yuri, remember what I promised you? That I’d protect you from anyone, no matter what.”

Yuri didn’t answer. She only stared stonily at him.

“Your Highness! You’ve been deceived. You finally had a chance to take the throne, but this woman interfered and ruined it all. Please, let this show you the truth!”

One of the knights drew his sword and lunged toward Yuri. The other knight held Edward back so that he wouldn’t try to protect her. Yuri merely stared blankly at the scene unfolding before her.

“Stop it!” Edward yelled, wrenching free from the knight at the last moment. He threw himself between Yuri and the sword.

It happened in an instant. The sword ran Edward through with a dull, sickening squish. The room went completely silent, as if time had stopped. As soon as the knight realized what he’d done, his face twisted with horror, and he dropped the sword with trembling hands. It fell to the floor with a clatter.

Edward collapsed to the ground, covered in crimson. He looked at the blood pouring from his body in shock, then up at Yuri and smiled.

“Yuri...” He reached toward her, still trying to be by her side.

Finally, the light returned to Yuri’s vacant eyes. “Why... Why did you protect me?!” she screamed. “I’m nothing but a burden to you! Why didn’t you try to get rid of me like them? Isn’t that what a noble is supposed to do? So why?!”

Edward coughed up blood as he answered, still smiling. “Because...I promised you.”

He had stayed true to his word and protected Yuri with his life. If he had never come to her cell with those knights, this never would have happened. Yet...he was the only one who had ever truly tried to protect her. Despite everything that had led to this moment, his love shook her to the core.

No one ever helped Yuri. No one ever tried to protect her. Her mother had mourned the love she lost, hated her position in life, and ignored her daughter. Her father should have loved her mother, yet he'd easily abandoned her. Then he'd tried to use his own daughter.

But Edward...he was the only one who had never abandoned her. He was the only one who had ever tried to save her.

So why? It was a foolish question. He had told her many times that he loved her. That he wanted to spend his life with her. That he would always protect her.

But every time he had told her those things, she'd laughed coldly on the inside, thinking, *Please, I know he'll abandon me the second it's convenient for him.*

She was wrong. Edward really had risked his life to save her. The moment she realized that, a sweet, warm feeling spread inside of her. "Stupid... You're so stupid," she said with a laugh. Simultaneously, big, fat tears streamed down her face. She crouched and took his hand.

"You're...right," Edward whispered with labored breathing. Yet he smiled happily. Then...all of his strength was gone.



“So, so stupid...” Yuri whispered as she squeezed his hand tightly.

That was when Leticia made her move. The two knights and the older man with the fine clothes who stood before them were startled when they saw her suddenly emerge from the stone wall, where there was no door.

“Hello, Yuri Neuer,” Leticia said, completely ignoring the men.

Yuri barely reacted. She just kept holding Edward’s hand, not even looking at Leticia.

A wry smile crossed Leticia’s lips, and she turned toward the three men who had come with Edward. “Even though he was imprisoned, Edward is still a member of the royal family. No crime is more severe than endangering the life of a royal. Don’t tell me you really think you can get away with this?” She grinned, an expression quite unbecoming of the situation.

The color drained from the men’s faces.

“I-I was just doing what I was told!”

“So was I!”

The two knights tried to run. But Rudius was standing there, blocking their paths.

“Move!” They drew their swords at him.

Rudius quietly drew his own sword. “Your Highness?”

That was all he said, yet Leticia seemed to know exactly what he meant and nodded with a smile.

“Very well.” Rudius took a step forward toward the men. He butchered them with a single stroke of his sword.

It was over in an instant, almost as if he were trying to show the overwhelming disparity in their power. Leticia watched the scene without a flinch. Berne went slightly pale, but that was all. Yuri seemed completely unconcerned.

The one who reacted most was the man who had accompanied Edward. He was visibly shaken and slumped to the ground. “Wh-why are you...?”

“Hm? I went public after you were put on house arrest... You know who I am, don’t you?” Leticia giggled like a mischievous child. “Sorry, did you want to know why I’m here? Well, that’s because I knew you were coming today.”

“What?!” The man was shocked.

“I knew what you were up to a long time ago. I just decided not to do anything about it. Yet.”

“So you knew this was going to happen?!”

“I had no idea my brother was going to shield Yuri, no. Although that would’ve saved me a lot of effort. Rudy, seize this man and take him away.”

“But...”

“Don’t worry about guarding me. We’re the only ones here. Once he’s in a cell, you can come back for me.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Rudius pulled the man to his feet and took him out of the tower.

The only ones remaining were the betrayed Edward; Yuri, still by his side; Berne, who looked utterly bewildered; and an expressionless Leticia.

“Before...” Yuri spoke in a quiet voice. “Before, you said it would’ve saved you a lot of effort. Don’t tell me you were planning on killing Ed all along?”

“Hm? I thought you didn’t care about him. That he was nothing but a pawn to you?” Leticia retorted.

Yuri flinched and her face twisted. “Just answer me!”

“Regardless of whether I gave the order, he would’ve been sentenced to death eventually. But, hmm...yes... I was planning on blaming the knights for his death and getting rid of him right here and now.”

Both Yuri and Berne looked shocked by Leticia’s cruel confession.

“But why?!” Yuri cried. “He’s your brother!”

“I’ve never seen him nor talked to him before today, but yes. He is my brother.”

“So then *why*?!”

“Because it was necessary,” Leticia replied calmly as Yuri screamed at her. “If I let him live, he would keep causing trouble. More people would rear their heads, like that man, and try to give him safe harbor. This kingdom doesn’t have the capacity to endure another internal struggle. Yuri, didn’t you want this kingdom to be destroyed? How much blood would you have spilled to accomplish your goals?”

“I’m nothing like you! You sacrificed your own flesh and blood!”

“That’s true. However, I’m a member of this kingdom’s royal family. I’ll do whatever is necessary to protect this kingdom.”

Yuri stared at her.

At that moment, Rudius arrived with several knights behind him. “I have returned, Your Highness.”

“Goodness, that was quick.”

“I brought the guards with me.”

“I see. I want you to return Yuri to her cell and take my brother away.”

“Yes, Princess.”

“Berne, Rudy, I’ll be leaving now. Have a nice day, Yuri.”

Yuri screamed something. Leticia had already turned her back and walked away, Berne and Rudius following after her. The tower was filled with the sound of their footsteps descending the stairs.

For a while, none of them spoke. Finally, Berne said with a sound of resolve in his voice, “Your Highness.”

“What is it, Berne?”

“Did you set this all up with Prince Alfred because you knew this was going to happen?”

“Yes and no.”

Berne gave her a puzzled look.

“My brother wanted to bring their deeds to light. He was going to deal with them once he came home. All he wanted was for them to be arrested. I was the

one who wanted them to be punished. I also wanted to eliminate as many risks to my brother as possible.”

“Why?”

Leticia smiled bitterly. “You’re asking me why too? Are you afraid of me?”

They came to the bottom of the stairs and exited the tower through the main door. It was bright and sunny outside, almost blindingly so compared to the dark, dreary atmosphere within. That did nothing to lighten the men’s moods.

“I simply want to know why you made a decision that made you clench your hand so hard you would bleed.”

All of a sudden, Leticia stopped and looked down at her hand in surprise, as if she hadn’t even noticed. Just as Berne had pointed out, blood dripped from her palm. Startled, Rudius tore a piece of cloth from his sash and wrapped her hand to stop the bleeding.

“Why would you put yourself through so much pain on purpose?”

Leticia said nothing for a while under Berne’s piercing gaze. Then she opened her mouth, her lips trembling, and spoke with self-deprecation. “I’m not allowed to be in pain.” Her words echoed around them. “I acted upon the decision I made. I take all responsibility. Being in pain is turning my eyes away from the burdens I must bear.”

“Yet you still chose that? And you’ll continue to choose it?”

“Yes. I can’t afford to stay still. I have to keep moving forward, even if the path is rocky. But...” Leticia paused for a moment. “If I could choose, I would wish for this to be the last time that I felt like the situation was inevitable and I had no other choice. I don’t regret it, though.” Then she smiled sadly. “Rudy, give my other brother a proper burial.”

“Are you sure, Your Highness?”

“Yes. There’s no reason to hide it. We can use that man’s testimony to let it be known that he died. I’m just asking for my own satisfaction.”

“It’s all right. If you had given him a harsher punishment, the people would have feared you, so I think this is for the best. It might be cowardly of me, but

I'm relieved that that is your order."

"I see. Go ahead and see to it, then."

"Very well."

Once Leticia reached her room, Rudius left to carry out her orders. She sat in her chair, exhausted.

"Can I bring you something?" Berne asked with concern.

"Nothing for now." Leticia shook her head and heaved a sigh. "I'm going to ask you a question that might be hard for you to answer. If you don't want to answer it, you can just say so. What did you think when he died?"

For a moment, Berne looked startled, as if taken completely off guard. "A number of thoughts ran through my head... We spent a long time together, although looking back on it now, it seems relatively short." He paused, then offered his honest opinion. "Before, you said that this was inevitable, and that you wanted it to be the last time you felt that way. I could say the exact same thing. I find myself wondering if I could've done something different to change this, so that none of this would have happened." He smiled self-effacingly.

"Edward and I were on two different paths. But not because I chose to be. I was just lucky. My family and those around me showed me the wider world. Otherwise, I might've ended up just like him."

"That's true."

"I pity him, and I regret his fate. However, I won't allow myself to give up. In order to accept my good fortune, I won't look away from the mistakes of my past. The only thing I can do is devote myself wholeheartedly to serving our kingdom."

Leticia closed her eyes as she intently listened. "Then let me ask you again: Can't you walk the same path as I do?"

"And I will answer once again. I will, for as long as you continue down a path that serves our kingdom."

Leticia smiled faintly. "Yes. Well then. Let's get back to work."

Chapter 26:

The Duke's Daughter Settles Things

“ED’S DEAD...?” I blurted out, shell-shocked. Ed had lost the war for succession, and I’d assumed he would be executed eventually, but I couldn’t hide my surprise at the sudden news. For a moment, memories I’d shared with him flashed through my mind. I wondered why, since any positive feeling I’d had toward him had long since been replaced with hatred and contempt. “Why, after all this, am I remembering the good times we shared?”

Merida smiled gently at my self-deprecating wonder. “Most likely because people are more inclined to think charitably of the dead.”

I was out on the terrace, having taken a break from work. Well, to put it more accurately, Sebastian had practically dragged me away from my desk and forced me to take a break. Merida came up shortly after to give me a new dessert she’d just developed, and that was when Tanya delivered the news.

“Even if the person was someone you absolutely despised, it’s difficult to feel hatred for them when they die. You start to

remember the good instead of focusing on the reasons you disliked them. It’s the best way for those left behind to cope.”

Merida’s words rang true in my confused heart. “Hm... I suppose you’re right.”

It was a simple fact that at one time, I had loved Edward, so much so that I barely saw the world around me. That was also why I hated him so much. He was the reason I’d felt so empty when everything had slipped from my grasp. I hadn’t wanted to care about him anymore. While the memory hurt, I wrapped myself up in my own business so thoroughly that I didn’t have time to dwell. By the time I had the presence of mind to really look at the world around me again, Edward was nothing more than a nuisance to me. I viewed him as an enemy, a threat who kept attacking me unprovoked. I was angry, but at the same time, I no longer cared about him as a person. I even pitied him at times.

I had indeed considered him an enemy, but the reason I didn't care about him as a person wasn't because my past hatred had faded—it was because he had looked like nothing but a puppet being pulled in all directions.

It was all ancient history. Perhaps Merida was right, that it was natural to want to look fondly on the past. Those emotions were no longer fresh, and all that remained was a feeling of nostalgia.

"My lady, I have another announcement, if I may." Tanya's hesitant voice pulled me from my reverie.

"Y-yes, I'm sorry. Go on."

"You have received a letter from Princess Leticia."

"Oh, really?" I took the letter and quickly read it. She had neat, beautiful handwriting. I remembered when I met her by coincidence that day in town. She looked so much like Alfred, with those brilliant peridot-colored eyes and gorgeous golden hair. She was beautiful in the sunlight and reminded me of the perfect fairy tale princess. But the contents of the letter were harshly realistic, contrasting greatly with that mental image. I frowned as I continued reading.

"Is something the matter?"

"She says they're leaving the matter with Acacia completely in my hands." Both Merida and Tanya looked shocked. I couldn't blame them. This was far too significant an issue for an acting governor to deal with alone. It was an international incident, after all. "That means she already reached a consensus with the other governors and established it as the kingdom's policy. I'd heard that Princess Leticia was involved in the government as Prince Alfred's assistant, but this goes beyond something an assistant could accomplish. She's completely taken over his duties."

"That must mean she's highly capable, or the other governors wouldn't obey her."

"You're right. It seems she really has a great deal of control over the nobles... and the government."

"Perhaps that's for the best? Khadir is the one we're engaging, so no one is more qualified to negotiate with him than you, my lady."

“You think too highly of me.”

After we defeated the Royal Acacian Army’s vanguard, Tanya had reported that the Acacian king had suddenly passed away and Khadir was running the government in his place. I’d expected this was his plan, it had just happened a bit quicker than I was anticipating. The official announcement from Acacia was that the king had died suddenly from an illness. It wasn’t a coincidence that it happened with such impeccable timing, because in fact, Khadir had waited until the first prince was captured to kill the king. I had to laugh to myself. Truly there was discord in every kingdom. Our cultures and traditions differed, but at the root, people were all the same.

“Yes, I shall do my best for Armelia, now that the matter has been left in my hands.”

“You’re so steadfast, my lady. Are you sure it’s only for the duchy?” Merida asked with an amused smile.

“Yes, that’s right. Everything I do is for the good of Armelia. Not the kingdom. And it seems the kingdom—well, Princess Leticia, at least—understands that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everything I do for Armelia benefits the kingdom in a roundabout way. In her letter, she told me to do as I pleased for that very reason.”

“Hm? So they’re recognizing your power, then?”

“Who knows? Isn’t my power Armelia itself?” It sounded very much like Leticia was saying *“We’ll give you the freedom to do as you please, so long as you don’t start entertaining any truly strange notions.”*

“Well, at any rate, has everything been arranged for my meeting with Prince Khadir?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you. Let me know if anything else comes up.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Speaking of news...how is the battle going with Tweil?”

“After Prince Alfred reached the battlefield, there was a dramatic change, especially with the people in the former Lord Monroe’s domain.”

“Oh? Have they realigned with Tasmeria, then?”

“Yes. They were impressed with a number of things, including the prince’s speeches, his ability to supply goods and resources, and his elaborate strategies against the Tweil army. All of that combined perfectly to touch the people’s hearts and make them understand the necessity of the war.”

“That’s a glowing review.”

“I’m only repeating what my agents on the ground are telling me. In fact, their reports extol him to the point that I wondered for a moment if they had double-crossed me and gone to work for him, what with all those positive remarks!”

“Goodness! Ha ha ha. Of course they’re still loyal to you, though.”

“That’s right. The war has just turned in our favor.”

“I see. So not only is he a gifted politician, but he’s a genius tactician too? Now I’m curious about just what kind of speeches he gave!”

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t ask about the particulars.”

“It’s all right, I was just curious. But, hm... I hope this means we’ll claim victory over Tweil soon.”

“Certainly.”

“Well, thank you, Tanya.”

“You’re most welcome.”

Just then, another servant called for Tanya, and she excused herself. Now that that was settled, I turned to Merida’s dessert. “Ooh, these are delicious.” A gentle, sweet flavor spread throughout my mouth.

“I’m glad you like it. I was thinking about sending these to the troops who fought on the front line and the volunteers in the east.”

“Oh?”

“I kept the costs down and came up with a recipe that won’t spoil right away. People can live with the bare necessities, but that doesn’t always mean a good

quality of life. I don't think it's a bad thing to treat yourself sometimes, so you can have something to look forward to the next day."

"You're right. So you came up with this?"

"Well, I came up with the recipe by myself, but Sei and I worked together on the concept."

"I like it. I want you to use money from the Azuta Corporation to fund it."

"I'm surprised... I didn't expect you to approve the idea so quickly!"

"Well, not only do I think it's a good idea from the standpoint of my position as acting governor but as a businesswoman too. Sales are stable, so we should be thinking about how we can benefit society as a company. It'll improve our image, and even if there are no direct profits to be had, I think it'll end up turning profits for us in the long run."

"In the long run... Yes, I think you're right," Merida murmured to herself, then gave me a bright smile. It was so contagious that I couldn't help but smile too.

"I'll let you take care of this matter, Merida. Do whatever you please."

"Yes, my lady."

Even though we were talking business, I enjoyed a peaceful afternoon. I had a lot to do, from supporting the casualties' families, to caring for the injured, to making sure we had enough money and supplies for all of that, but I'd finally gotten most of it taken care of. I used reports from the ministries to sort through plans, make decisions, and give orders. I'd accomplished all that already. Now all there was left to do was enact the plans and make any necessary adjustments based on the results. However, I thought it would be wise to recharge my batteries for a bit before tending to the very serious responsibility of negotiations with Acacia.

So while Sebastian had forced me to take this break, in the end I was grateful to him.

Just then, Tanya came back into the room looking shaken. "I'm so sorry to interrupt your break, my lady. We just received urgent news."

I had a bad feeling about her expression. Had Acacia attacked again? Or

perhaps something terrible had befallen our people in the war with Tweil. “Yes? What is it?”

“We have secured victory against the kingdom of Tweil.”

“Oh, my! Well, isn’t that wonderful!” It was the best news I could have received, but for some reason, Tanya didn’t look happy. In fact, she looked downright distraught.

“Yes, but... But... Dean... Dean has...!” Tanya whispered the words as if she couldn’t bear to say them. The fact that she called him Dean and not Prince Alfred meant she was quite shaken indeed. “Along with the news of our victory...came the news that Dean was killed in battle.”

My entire world went dark.

“What?”

I didn’t understand what she had said. Dean was killed... As in, he was dead? Was that what she meant? My brain and heart refused to comprehend. I repeated Tanya’s words over and over in my head. “Tanya, I don’t understand. What happened to Dean?”

For a moment her face twisted, but she swiftly regained her composure. “He was struck by a stray arrow and died.”

“Are you absolutely certain?” My heart pounded violently and painfully inside my chest. I was afraid of her answer.

“Yes. I received the same message from all of my agents, who were stationed in different regions.”

Then my heart broke into a million pieces.

“Is this some kind of joke? We won! Didn’t you say Tasmeria won?! So then why?!” I lost my senses and rose to my feet, screaming. “Why?!”

My violent outburst didn’t last long.

I wanted Tanya to say it was a lie. I wanted her to say the reports must have been wrong. But I could tell by the look on her face that it was true, because I’d never seen her like this before. Her mouth was trembling, and her eyes were red. That told me it was the undeniable truth. I was overcome by grief, by

emptiness. My strength left my body, and I thought I would collapse on the spot. I clung desperately to the edge of the desk, curling over at the waist. The impact sent the documents I had stacked on my desk flying into the air.

“My lady!” Tanya started slowly toward me as I froze with shock.

No, don't come closer. I don't want to hear another thing. My heart was screaming, and I tried to back away from her. But it was like I was rooted to the spot. I couldn't move. “I'm sorry... Please...leave me alone.” I forced the words from my mouth.

Tanya and Merida's expressions crumbled.

No, please don't make those faces. I'm fine. I wanted to say that, but I just couldn't.

I silently stood and started walking, determined to return to my room. My vision was hazy. It was so clouded over and warped, I had no idea if I was even going down the right hallway. Everything had lost its color. Even though I saw clearly, I didn't recognize any of it. I didn't know up from down. It felt like I was floating. I walked close to the wall, somehow making it back to my room. The instant I opened the door and went inside, I went weak and collapsed on the spot.

“Dean...” I whispered his name as tears flowed from my eyes.

I'm not sure how long I stayed there. I simply sat on the floor in shock for a long, long time. Before I knew it, the sun was setting outside the window. I'd only meant to stay there for a while.

I should get back to work, I thought. My body wouldn't move. I tried to stand, but I lacked the energy, so I sank back down.

Come to think of it, the first time I collapsed, the next thing I'd worried about was work. ...And Dean had dropped everything to come to my rescue.

“Hey... Come help me again, Dean... Like you did back then.”

I was in the same straits. A glimmer of hope within me whispered that he would suddenly appear out of nowhere like he had before, but my rational mind extinguished the thought. It was the same situation, but Dean wouldn't

come. Tanya had said so. She said Dean was dead. He was hit by a stray arrow and had died. He was dead. He wasn't in this world any longer, no matter where I searched or how hard I tried to find him. I would neither see nor talk to him ever again.

As soon as that thought crossed my mind, I opened my mouth and let out a wail as if I were releasing all the dark emotions filling my heart.

"Waaaaaaaaaahhh!"

Tears streamed down my face again. *No, no, no! I can't believe he's gone. I don't want to believe he's gone! Because we won! We beat Ed, we beat Twei! So then why?!*

I grabbed fistfuls of my hair and screamed as loud as I could.

I can't believe I'll never hear his voice again.

I can't believe I'll never see his smile again.

I can't believe he's gone!

My entire world went black. I felt sadness, grief, pain. Those emotions came in waves, tormenting me. My heart hurt. No matter how much I pulled at my hair, those feelings seemed rooted in the depths of my heart, and there was nothing I could do.

The pocket watch I wore on a chain around my neck swayed. I took it out and caressed it. *"They put a lot of thought into this design. I know it may be forward of me, but I dearly want you to keep the other half of it."* I remembered what Dean said when he gave it to me. It was a tender, beautiful memory.

"Why... Why?!" I was overcome with an immense despair, as if I had lost half of my being. I squeezed my hand over the watch. It was painful, and I didn't want to accept it. I reached my other hand out in vain, searching for what I'd lost. Of course, there was nothing to grasp. Nothing but empty air. The reality of it just made everything more painful. All I could do was sink in my feelings, and cry, and scream.

Eventually, my strength gave out, and I realized I was sitting there, cowering on the floor. As soon as I got up, I started crying again. It wasn't a dream. When I looked around, everything was still the same.

“Dean...where are you?” Why had I been reborn into this world, where I had to endure this suffering? Dark thoughts overtook my heart, making me cry that much harder.

The next time I lifted my gaze, it was dark outside. Just like my heart. The sky was cloudy, allowing light from neither the stars nor the moon. I wished morning would never come. I hoped tomorrow wouldn't reach me. Because he wouldn't be there. I couldn't bear to go on without him here.

Yet despite that grief, I had to go on.

I cried and screamed, then collapsed again.

“Tanya. How is Iris?” Merellis asked, but Tanya shook her head. Her expression was still filled with sorrow and pain. “I see...” Merellis had a similar look.

“I can't bear to see her like this, in so much pain...screaming and crying,” said Tanya. “She's sleeping, but I think it's because she simply passes out. She's barely eating... If she keeps this up, she'll make herself sick.”

“I know... I thought it would be best to leave her be, but I'm frightened to let it go on any longer.”

“It's my fault. I shouldn't have told her that Dean died. I can't express how much I regret it.”

Merellis shook her head. “No... She would've learned eventually. After all, he's the kingdom's first prince.” She let out a sigh.

“I at least should have timed it better. I brought her the news that she lost someone very close to her when she was already exhausted. And now I can't even comfort her because she's so distraught...”

“I'm sure that's terribly painful. I can't even imagine, and I've no idea what to do either. How do you comfort someone who's lost someone they love?”

“Love?” Tanya's eyes widened with surprise.

Merellis looked surprised by this reaction in turn. A sad smile crossed her face. “Goodness, you didn't realize? Iris was clearly in love with Dean.”

“Really? Ah, yes, I suppose you’re right...”

“Tanya, you need to rest.”

Tanya shook her head. “No! How could I possibly rest when Lady Iris is in such a state?!”

“That’s exactly why you *should* rest, Tanya. Who will take care of Iris when she finally recovers her senses if you’ve collapsed from exhaustion as well?”

“But...”

“You look like you could crumple on the spot. This is an order. Go rest, now.” Merellis said firmly.

Finally, Tanya nodded reluctantly.

“The children from the orphanage are here,” Merellis told her in an especially tender voice.

“You mean Mina’s orphanage?”

“Yes, that’s right. I asked them to come back another time due to the present...situation, but they’re worried for Iris too. So many people are waiting for her to recover...including you.” Merellis chuckled softly, finally bringing a smile to Tanya’s face, strained though it was. “When she wakes up, I’ll try talking to her. It’s time she stopped drowning herself in her sadness.”

Tanya breathed a sigh of relief.

How long had I been like this? I had no idea. I felt like I had seen the sun rise and set many times in the corner of my mind. My memory was hazy, and I wasn’t sure if I moved through reality or a dream. Memories of him popped into my head, then disappeared, over and over again. Like when we had gone to the orphanage together, or all the days we worked side by side, or when he had saved me during my excommunication, or when we had traveled to the east together...

So many memories. So many that we shared. I remembered each and every one, immersing myself, and cried. It felt both like an eternity and a brief moment at the same time. Or perhaps it was the reverse. Either way, we’d

spent so much time together. Looking back on it now, I cherished each and every memory.

“Just keep doing what you’ve been doing, my lady. I will protect you from anyone. So please...entrust your body to me.”

I suddenly remembered those words he’d spoken in east Armelia.

“You liar. I hate you,” I whispered but immediately regretted it. “I lied. I love you.”

The words “I love you” were shaky because I was crying. They fell heavy upon my heart. They were why I didn’t care anymore, not about anything. The world carried on around me as if nothing had happened even though I suffered. It was leaving him behind. In the end, were our existences really so trivial? If they were, what was the point of existing? What was the meaning?

I thought all my tears had dried up, but they sprang forth anew.

Suddenly, I stood and went out onto the balcony. The place where he and I had talked so often before. We had spoken of our feelings about our families, the future of Armelia, and the past. The view from the balcony of my own room was different from that of my study, but it still held nostalgia. The sun was so bright I had to shield my eyes. It burned them, tender as they were from all the crying.

“Iris!”

I heard the voices of young children. I chuckled to myself, thinking I had really lost it now, if I was hearing things. Then I realized I really had heard them and squinted toward the garden. There I saw Mina and the children from the orphanage. They were so small in the distance that I couldn’t be sure, but I just knew it was them.

What are they doing here? I wondered. “Are they worried about me?” I murmured, but there was no one beside me to answer.

It didn’t take long to find out, because the children called to me.

“Lady Iris! Get better soon!”



However, they were soon scolded by Mina, and they stopped yelling. I saw her with her hand on her hips gesturing wildly, and I had to laugh.

"I...I can still laugh." I was shocked. I was in so much pain and so sad. I hated Tweil, I cursed this kingdom, I despised everything. Yet I had laughed. A warm feeling resurfaced inside of me.

"You're a cog in the wheel of this kingdom. And so am I. We aren't meant to collide. Even if we travel down different paths, we'll continue looking in the same direction. So, knowing that, I can go anywhere and do anything."

I remembered his words to me in the palace gardens.

At the same time, I asked myself, *Have I really lost everything? Have I? Is my existence really meaningless? Is it really?*

I denied it. All of it.

The shell I had erected between me and the world shattered. I didn't care if my existence was meaningless, because the result of the path I walked down was right here. I had taken care of, protected, and built a future for those children, and the people who lived in the duchy. That had been my goal when I started down this path, and the people of Armelia had believed in me and followed me to this moment. Yet in my darkest hour, I had rejected them.

It was true that I had lost someone very dear to me. My heart was yet broken. But I hadn't lost *everything*. There was a path I needed to continue following, and the lives of the Armelian people, who had walked with me and supported me, waited there.

"Excuse me, Iris." Just as I went back into my room, my mother entered. "Oh my. By the looks of it, you don't need my help at all!" she said with a smile.

"Yes, I'm sorry to have worried you."

"It's all right. You must have truly loved him if you've been so very shaken."

For a moment, heat rushed to my cheeks. Then I regained my composure. "Yes...I did. I'm a fool, Mother."

"Oh? Whatever do you mean?"

“Because I didn’t realize how much I cared until I lost him.”

She listened to me with a serious expression.

“We had decided to go our separate ways. That didn’t mean we stopped caring for each other. Even though he walked down a different path, I thought it would be bearable so long as he was still out there somewhere.”

“Isn’t that what love is?”

I gave my mother a confused look.

“When you love someone, you continue trusting in them and caring about them even if they don’t walk beside you. You cherish their existence. Right?”

I smiled bitterly. “I suppose so. I love him.” I was sad that I hadn’t been able to tell him that. I would probably always regret it. “But there are other things I love too.”

Now it was my mother’s turn to give me a puzzled look. “What’s that?”

“I love this duchy and the people who live in it. When I was in the darkest days of my grief and had lost myself in it, I thought I didn’t care about anything anymore. I overlooked the things I loved. Now I know that if I lost them too, then I really would be filled with nothing but regret.” They were all so important to me, I couldn’t choose between them. If I lost any of them, my world would be consumed by a void. “More than anything, he wouldn’t want me to turn my back on the people. I want to live my life so that he would be proud of me.”

“That’s wonderful,” my mother murmured. “You’re so wonderful, Iris. If you must know the truth, I came to scold you for letting your grief take over and make you turn your back on the things that are yet important to you.”

A shiver ran down my spine. My mother was so intimidating that even imagining such a scolding made me tremble.

“It seems like that was a needless worry, wasn’t it? You already know. You know what’s important to you, and that you’re important to others as well.”

“Thank you.”

“There will be more times in your life when you feel pain and sadness. But don’t forget that even though it’s vital to let yourself grieve, you can’t lose

yourself in it. Because you're still alive." Mother reached out and gently clasped my hand. "Remember how I told you that I lost my mother to bandits?"

I nodded. I could never forget a story like that. She had shared her painful past with me when I was struggling with my own issues. That story had given me the courage to regain my footing.

"After that, I was lost in the pain and grief of losing my mother. I couldn't see a future. The only thing I lived for was training, so that I could get my vengeance on the bandits who killed her. I was obsessed with my grief and utterly forgot what was important. As a result, I worried so many people who were dear to me. My brother lost his temper with me and yelled, 'Have you forgotten that you're still alive?!'"

Those words were an echo of what my mother had come to tell me just now.

"I wasn't alone with my sadness and pain, yet I thought I was the only one in the whole world who felt that way. I was wrong."

"Mother..."

"You can't regain what you've lost. So it's only natural to be sad. But you must not let it hold you prisoner to the point that you despise the world. You can't turn your back on the present and lose yourself in the past. It won't bring anyone back. If you keep giving in to your grief, you'll be consumed by regret. You'll wish you'd done things differently and learn nothing from the lessons that grief can teach you. Everyone loses someone precious to them eventually. Everyone has to die at some point. It's an inevitable part of life, that our time with our loved ones is limited. That's what makes it so special. And that's why you should make the most out of the time you have with them. Do just as you said—live your life in a way that makes the person you lost proud of you."

My mother's words resonated deeply within my heart. "Thank you, Mother."

The moment I said it, she wrapped her arms around me in a warm embrace. "You've had such a tough time, Iris. You did the very best you could. And you remembered what is important."

I tensed. My mother's words and her warmth were so reassuring that I burst into tears.

The following day, I returned to work. Tanya tearfully told me how much she had worried about me, and Merida said the same. The other people in the mansion didn't know the particulars of the situation, so they assumed that I had fallen sick from exhaustion, but they were similarly worried about me. The officials from the various ministries tearfully, but happily, welcomed me back to work. I was both guilty and a little embarrassed as I returned to my regular duties. The wounds on my heart hadn't healed, and I hadn't forgotten about Dean, no matter how I buried myself in my work—or perhaps *because* I buried myself in my work. After all, we had spent so much time in this mansion working together. Buried in our work, dreaming about the future.

Every time we came up with a new idea, we were happy for each other. Every time we hit a wall, we helped each other work through it. There were too many memories with him in this mansion for me to get over him there. But what else could I do? There was nothing. I still loved him.

I kept those thoughts in the back of my mind as I tackled the work that had piled up in my absence. The days passed like this, until I had gradually returned to my normal self. That was good, because soon I had a vitally important responsibility to carry out—my meeting with the kingdom of Acacia.

Tanya stood behind me, and beside her, my mother. Even though they were dressed the same as usual, they were both secretly armed. They wanted to be able to act instantly, should the need arise. Since they were by my side, I had tasked Lyle and Dida with guarding the mansion. This was supposed to be a peaceful negotiation, and I thought it would be unwise to have obvious bodyguards by my side.

I clenched my hands into fists and murmured to myself. "It's all right. There's nothing to worry about. You can do this."

"What's wrong, Iris?" Mother asked.

I gave her a tight smile. "Just trying to give myself courage."

Tanya came up to my side. "My lady, he's here."

Tension filled me. "Welcome, Prince Khadir," I greeted him with a smile.

Khadir was wearing the formal garments of the Acacian royal family, and he had a soft smile. To be honest, his smile seemed a bit shady, but I suspected he likely thought the same about me.

“I’m overjoyed to meet you.” He took my hand and kissed it.

Khadir’s dramatic gesture put a wry smile on my face. “It’s so nice to meet you *for the first time*, Your Highness,” I said with extra emphasis.

Now it was his turn to smile wryly at me. I was subtly telling him that I’d play along with his story, but he had to give a little too. I was sure he didn’t want anyone else knowing that the last time he’d come here, he posed as “Hafiz.”

“Please come in and have a seat, my lord.” I motioned toward a chair, then sat across from him. I studied the prince. He wore a confident smile on his handsome face, and he had a refined aura reserved for nobility. His very presence suggested true royalty.

“This is a very nice territory. The people are wealthy, and the government is stable.”

“Yes, thank you.” *How absolutely shameless*, I thought to myself angrily. Of course I didn’t dare show it. Instead, I lowered my gaze and said sadly, “However, an awfully frightening thing did happen in our duchy recently.”

“Oh?” I thought I saw his eyes glint.

“Yes. Another kingdom attacked us.”

“My, that is a shame.”

“Yes, a dreadful shame. I could hardly believe that the kingdom *of the man who proposed marriage to me* would do such a thing.”

For a moment, a heavy silence fell over the room. I was testing Khadir, seeing what he would say next.

“Please allow me to explain,” he said. “I’m afraid the former king secretly conspired with the kingdom of Tweil to attack your territory. It was not my wish to do so.”

I let out a sigh. “It wasn’t your wish? Still, it’s an undeniable fact that the kingdom of Acacia invaded. So, how will you take responsibility for that?”

Khadir smiled. Here, when I was questioning how he'd take responsibility for war. For a moment, that sent shivers down my spine. "Pardon me. I explained my own personal feelings. I don't want you to hate me, after all. Regardless of whether it was my wish to attack you, as the king, I need to explain our perspective. This tragedy was the result of reckless behavior on the part of the former king and a select group of people. The kingdom at large had no wish to do injury to your domain."

"You may have altered the description, but the meaning is the same."

"My, my. That's rather harsh," Khadir said with an amused chuckle.

"Can you blame me? My people, who I hold dear, were *attacked*."

"How intimidating you are."

"Goodness. Do I really seem that frightening?"

"No, you aren't showing it on your face at all, and *that's* what makes it frightening. You don't allow yourself to be swayed by emotions. That's the most dangerous sort of person to deal with, because they can take hold of a situation in the blink of an eye, if you let down your guard."

I inwardly clicked my tongue. What a difficult man.

"Now, I have come on behalf of my kingdom bearing an appropriate sum as reparations for the victims who suffered during this disturbance," he said. "The details are in the documents here. All you have to do is sign on the dotted line."

An elderly man who waited behind the prince stepped forward and reverently handed me a document.

I took it and looked it over. "This isn't nearly enough," I declared as soon as I read it.

"Oh?" Khadir's eyes sharpened. Suddenly, I felt more tension in the air than I ever had at any other meeting I'd conducted.

"Of course not. You see, we have custody of your kingdom's first prince, Jalaal. He's under our protection."

The tension emanating from Khadir grew positively overwhelming. Deep down within, I was sweating like a pig.

“You took someone who attacked your domain under your *protection*?”

“We took him as a prisoner of war, of course. He attacked us. When you became king, I shared that news with him. I’m not certain whether it was because he’d had a bit of a rough time after his capture or because he finally realized the position he was in, but afterward, he apologized from the bottom of his heart and pledged to rely on us completely.”

“He merely feared your power.”

“No, no, not at all! Before, you referred to yourself as Acacia’s king. But under what grounds did you become king? The rightful heir is still alive, after all. In *my* custody.”

With that, Khadir’s expression finally changed. “...I suggest you stop right there. I won’t hesitate to mobilize my kingdom against someone who interferes with our government.”

“Goodness.” I laughed out loud. Khadir was finally showing his true colors, and things were getting interesting. “Now you’re the one who’s frightening! It doesn’t take long for you to threaten someone with force, does it? I suppose that means the things you said before...” I trailed off meaningfully because I knew he would get my point.

“That means the things you said before can’t be trusted.”

I didn’t speak the words out loud, so as not to belabor the point. “I was merely asking a question. Yes, to be honest, I don’t care who’s king of Acacia. It doesn’t matter whether it’s you or the first prince who now feels he owes me a debt on his honor. It doesn’t matter to me what happens to some kingdom across the sea. It would be wonderfully easy for me to immobilize your army before they even have a chance to strike. Because, you see, I’ve already laid the groundwork for such an outcome.”

The old man behind Khadir moved slightly. I saw Tanya’s expression tense. My mother still wore her beautiful smile, however. I studied Khadir, wondering how he would respond.

All of a sudden, he laughed out loud, invigorated. “You really are frightening.” He lifted a hand, and the old man froze. “How about I ask you this: Are you

satisfied with me being king? What is it that you want?”

“Half again the amount of money specified in this document, plus a treaty of nonaggression against Tasmeria as well as a treaty of commerce.”

“I’ll agree to the sum. You’ve done your homework.”

When we looked into the people who had taken over the harbor in the east, we’d found that they were from families resembling the second prince’s faction in Tasmeria, right down to their ultimate fates. In other words, after their families were identified as having taken part in the attack and their other misdeeds exposed, their assets were seized. Khadir had that money on hand, of course, and he was trying to use those funds to pay me off. Since our agents knew the sum he had confiscated, I instantly recognized that the sum he offered was only about forty percent of the total assets he had acquired. So I guessed that he would easily be able to pay me at least one hundred and fifty percent of that amount. Judging by his reaction, I was correct.

“Now, as for the treaty of nonaggression and treaty of commerce... Pardon me for asking, but as a territorial governor, do you have the authority to ask for such things on behalf of Tasmeria?”

“I’m actually the *acting* governor.”

“Pardon me. Well? Do you have that authority?”

“If I do, will you agree to my terms right now?”

“Well, I have no wish to fight you. I have no objections to the terms, so yes.”

“In that case, you may look these over to confirm the answer to your question.” I signaled to Tanya, who gave him three documents.

The first was an official signed document from Princess Leticia acting on behalf of Dean, stating that she left total authority in my hands regarding negotiations with Acacia. The second and the third were the same, but these were signed documents for both the treaty of nonaggression and treaty of commerce, giving me full authority to enact those as well.

“I’m surprised. You even have the proper paperwork in order.” Khadir chuckled. Despite what he said, he didn’t look very surprised at all.

“Yes, of course. This is a negotiation with Prince Khadir of Acacia, after all. I didn’t want to run the risk of offending you.”

“Ha ha ha. Well, you got me. But I want you to know that I meant what I said. I’ll read through the treaties, and if I have no objections, then I’ll sign them right here and now.”

So, he thoroughly read each and every document and signed them. It seemed he had no objections.

“That was quick.”

“But appropriate. If I had found anything objectionable, I wouldn’t have signed. As I said, you did your homework.”

“Thank you.”

I took the signed documents and added my signature. Then I gave a copy of each document to Prince Khadir and handed the other copy to Tanya for our records.

“Now, I shall have you return Jalaal.”

“Hm? Oh, but I haven’t told you the rest of my conditions.”

For a moment Khadir stared blankly at me. Then he let out a sigh. “You’re awfully shrewd, aren’t you? Fine, then. What else do you want?”

“Just one more thing. I want you to lower the tariffs between Armelia and Acacia by five percent for these items. Here’s a list.”

“My, my. You sure are demanding.”

“Am I? If you agree to lower the tariffs, then we shall also lower the tariffs on these items for Acacia.”

He closed his mouth and squeezed his eyes shut. For a moment the room was completely silent. No one dared to make a sound so as not to interfere with his thoughts. “Fine. Think of it as part of our reparations,” he finally said with a sigh.

I nearly let out a sigh of relief myself, but I managed to hold it in. Tanya handed him two more pieces of paper, and we signed each one. “I think that

these agreements will be beneficial for both our kingdoms in the long run.”

“Yes. But isn’t setting tariffs in this manner also restricting exports?”

“That wouldn’t necessarily be a problem for Acacia, would it?”

“I suppose not. You really got me this time. I thought that if I married you, that would remove all export restrictions. I suppose that’s your answer, then?”

“Yes. Thank you so much for the offer, but I will have to respectfully decline.”

“May I ask why?”

“First of all, the burden of being a queen is too great for me. I’m sure you understand that more than anyone.”

Khadir might have gotten his hands on the throne, but it wasn’t a done deal. He didn’t have a definitive claim like the first prince of our kingdom had, or the base of support. Of course it would be beneficial to the development of his kingdom to take a bride from Armelia, but the thing he needed most was to unite his own kingdom. That was just a guess on my part, based on the information from Tanya’s agents, but it seemed I was right. Of course I didn’t say so out loud; it would interfere with the negotiations.

“Yes, I do. I do, but even still, I want you. I would do anything to have you.” Khadir gave me a piercing look. I could tell that he meant every word. I didn’t know if it was because he thought he loved me or that I would simply be a convenient woman to have by his side. Either way, he meant it when he said he wanted me. I had a feeling that when he proposed, he had already planned on trying to get the throne. Perhaps he had even envisioned this meeting. Still, the fact that he had officially proposed marriage meant that he truly wanted me. For that reason, I had been afraid to meet him here today.

“In any case, due to the agreements that we have signed today, a marriage would no longer provide much benefit to either of our kingdoms. These conditions are all we can spare. Of course, it would be a different story altogether if there was some other kind of benefit to Armelia if I married you.”

Khadir gave me a keen grin. I was sure he was wondering just how much harsher I could be. “Very well, then. Now the kingdoms of Acacia and Tasmeria have successfully been joined in a peace treaty.”

“Yes. And I shall return Prince Jalaal to you. Would you like me to show you to him?”

“No. Just take him directly to my men who are waiting outside.”

“All right, then.”

“Lady Iris. I feel this has been a most personal meeting that has deepened our bonds of friendship. Is that a correct characterization?”

“Yes, it is. Friendship between your kingdom and my domain—and my kingdom—is a very good thing for all of us.”

“Since this has been a personal meeting, may I ask you a question?”

“Of course. I can’t guarantee an answer, though.”

“What is the real reason you won’t marry me?” Khadir asked this in such a breezy tone that, for a moment, I was shocked. Honestly, I hadn’t expected him to ask that. It was too difficult for me to speak freely about, so I said nothing.

That made him smile even more. “I just confirmed that this was a personal meeting, no? I promise I won’t be angry, no matter your answer. Think of it as the last request of a man who has a hard time giving up on the woman he hoped to marry.”

“It’s a terrible question.” I let out a sigh. My mother was still smiling cheerfully by my side.

“You have to marry someone, don’t you? It’s the same in every kingdom. It’s part of the responsibility of being a noble. It’s expected. Who could possibly be a better match for you than me?”

“I won’t deny it. There are very few noblewomen my age who are unmarried. I didn’t turn down your proposal because there was someone more suitable. But one day, I shall leave the Armelia family and go somewhere else to run a business. Oh, or perhaps I shall help at the orphanage.”

“Iris...” my mother said in a concerned voice, but I smiled at her. This was something that I’d been prepared for ever since Ed broke off our engagement and I came home to Armelia. I knew that I most likely wouldn’t be able to marry anyone at all.

The situation had changed a bit, but eventually, I had decided that if I didn't marry anyone, I would have to leave the family. I wouldn't become head of House Armelia anyway, so when the time came that Berne married and became governor, I would just be in the way.

"Either way, I won't marry you. You put my people in danger, with the incident before the attack."

"I'm surprised you figured it out."

I had to smile. It was purely a guess based on the information received from questioning Jalaal and reports gathered by Tanya's agents. I had no definitive proof. Just a hunch that he'd been the one behind the attack on city hall and the garrison in the east before the military strike in the harbor. His answer confirmed that I was right—he was the one who had ordered it.

"How could I marry someone who hurt the people and land I love so dearly? Even if I remain unmarried and I leave House Armelia to become an ordinary woman, just Iris, I will still devote the rest of my life to working for Armelia."

I stared at him, and he stared back at me, neither of us saying a word. It was as if we were trying to read each other's minds.

"All right, I admit defeat. I look forward to continuing a friendly relationship with you as your neighbor," he said with a sigh and stood.

"Yes, of course. I'm looking forward to doing the same." I rose to my feet to see him to the door.



“I’ll return to my home for now, but just so you know, I’m not giving up on you. I’ll be ready to steal you away the moment you let down your guard.”
Khadir took my hand again.

“Ooh, how frightening. That’s encouraging to hear. I’ll do my very best to stay right here in Armelia, then.”

He gave another wry chuckle, then left the room.

“It’s finally over.” After I made sure that the first prince of Acacia was safely escorted to the guards outside with the rest of the prisoners of war, I let out a sigh and flopped down onto the sofa.

“Yes, Iris. That must be how you conduct your business meetings all the time. I’m so very impressed. You did such a wonderful job!”

My mother gushed over me so much, I couldn’t help but laugh.

“You were so calm the whole time, Mother. You didn’t stop smiling even once. I’m the one who’s impressed.”

“Oh, really? Well, I knew that you would be able to handle the negotiation, Iris. And I knew that no matter what that old man standing behind him tried to pull, I would be able to take care of him instantly.”

A wry smile formed on my face. Nerves of steel, that was my mother through and through.

“A treaty of nonaggression and a treaty of commerce. Securing both of those with such a large kingdom is nothing but a boon for ours. Not only that, but you had him remove export restrictions and lowered the tariffs for Armelia. All in all, it was a tremendous victory.”

“I would have lost, had we gone to war. And if there had been no fighting to begin with, no one would have lost their lives or gotten hurt. I did everything I could to keep Armelia safe, but I failed. I had to do something to make up for it, or I would never be able to face our people again.”

“You’re so hard on yourself, Iris.”

“I’m not. As someone who holds the lives of many people in her hands, I have an equal number of responsibilities, so it’s only natural. I made a mistake, and saying ‘I’m sorry’ isn’t enough.”

“That’s true... But that’s precisely why the people follow you, dear. Because you’re that kind of person.”

I smiled. Tanya made us some tea, and we sat there together enjoying it. The meeting had been so nerve-racking that the hot herbal tea really did soothe me from the inside out.

“I’ll stay for another week, and if nothing else arises, then I shall take the House Anderson guard and return home.”

“Yes, that sounds fine. I’ve been thinking that I want to thank you in some way. It won’t be extravagant, but I’ll be holding a party for you all before you return home.”

“That would be wonderful. I’m sure they’ll love that. They’ve been going on and on about how delicious the food is here in Armelia.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I’ll have Merida go all out for the party, then.”

“Oh! Well, in that case, I’ll be looking forward to it too!”

When I saw my mother giggling softly, it really felt like things had gone back to normal. That made the tea taste even better as we sat there, chatting and enjoying our teatime together as we once had.

Sebastian came into the room and handed me a letter. “My lady, you’ve received word from Princess Leticia.”

I had no idea what it could possibly be about, so I hesitantly took and opened it. I read every word carefully.

I finished reading just as my mother asked, “What is it, Iris?”

I folded the paper and set it on the table as I answered. “She wants me to come to the capital and meet with Yuri.”

“Whatever for?” Mother looked positively baffled.

Honestly, I shared her bewilderment. “It seems Yuri is keeping her mouth shut

and won't respond to questioning. Recently, she's claimed that she'll speak so long as she can see me first. I have no idea why she would want to see me, though."

"Yes... You never know what's going on in that head of hers."

I had to chuckle. "You can say that again."

"Will you be going to the capital, my lady?"

"Yes, I suppose. My negotiations were successful, and everything's going smoothly here. Besides, I'm very curious to see what Yuri has to say to me. The princess asked me to come as soon as possible, so I should leave tomorrow."

"Goodness!"

"I'm sorry that I'll have to leave before the party..."

"Don't worry. I'll be there on Armelia's behalf."

I wondered if the guard would be happier that way. I'd met with them once with my mother to express my thanks. The way they looked at and respected my mother was something very close to reverence. It had shocked me then, but looking back on it now, it was a good memory. If they had such deep devotion to her, then I was sure they would be happy to have Mother see them off in my stead. In fact, it would surprise me if they didn't want to stay by her side.

"I'll be counting on you to take care of things here, Mother. Tanya, please get everything ready."

They both nodded.

"Yes, of course."

"Right away, my lady."

The next day, Tanya, Lyle, Dida, and a handful of other guards accompanied me to the capital. We arrived without incident, and I headed straight to the castle after a brief stop at the mansion. I'd hoped to talk to Father or Berne before going to see Yuri, but both of them were already at the castle. There was probably a lot to take care of in the aftermath of the war, so it couldn't be helped. Although, I was worried about my father's health, since Mother had said he wasn't yet fully recovered.

I arrived at the castle, which wasn't as quiet and refined as it usually was but instead filled with hustle and bustle.

Berne was there to greet me at the door. "We've been waiting for you, Sister."

"Goodness, I wasn't expecting you to go out of your way to greet someone as insignificant as me, Berne," I said as I signaled my guards to wait here.

"This is a matter of utmost importance. ...Also, I can assure you that no one in this kingdom thinks you insignificant, Sister."

"You certainly know how to flatter someone."

I let Berne guide me down the corridor. "I heard what happened in Armelia. I'd expect nothing less of you."

"Thank you."

"I'd love to talk more in depth with you later, but first let me ask you this: Is it true that you turned down Prince Khadir's proposal?"

"Yes, that's right. But don't worry. I'll leave House Armelia when you marry and take over as governor." I said this in as cheerful a voice as I could muster, but for some reason, he gave me a sheepish grin.

"I want to talk to you about that too, actually... Would you take over as head of House Armelia in my stead?"

"Huh?" I stopped in my tracks. "What in the world are you talking about? You're the rightful heir, Berne."

"On what grounds, though? You're the eldest, and based on your accomplishments alone, anyone would say you're much better suited for the job than I am."

"But..."

"As a member of House Armelia, I *want* you to be the heir."

"What will you do?"

"I don't really care, as long as I can remain involved with the government of the kingdom. I'll buy a house somewhere here in the capital and live there. I'll

think about the rest when the time comes. At any rate, we'll have to discuss it later. We're here."

I looked up and saw that we had arrived before an ornate door. My head was so busy thinking about what Berne had just told me, I could barely pull myself together to speak to Princess Leticia.

"Excuse us, Your Highness," Berne knocked on the door and opened it. So I had no choice but to switch gears mentally and follow him.

"It's so nice to see you again, Lady Iris."

"And you, my liege. Please excuse my rudeness—I had no idea about your true identity at the time."

Berne gave us a confused look. "Pardon me for interrupting, but is this not your first meeting?"

"No. I snuck into town one day and ran into Lady Iris."

I smiled wryly. I'd forgotten that Berne didn't know that I had worked with Prince Alfred, as Dean.

"At any rate, thank you so much for coming here so quickly even though I'm sure you're exhausted, Lady Iris. Without further ado, I'd like you to accompany me to the tower where she's being held, if that's all right."

"Yes, of course."

So Leticia, Berne, Tanya, and I made our way to the tower. The farther we got, the fewer people we saw. Finally, we reached our destination. It was away from the palace and had a dreary, depressing aura. We climbed a set of stairs and came to a room enclosed by iron bars.

"Here she is, Lady Iris." Leticia pointed to a cell with a girl inside of it.

My breath caught in my throat as soon as I saw her. She looked absolutely nothing like she had when I saw her last. She was rail thin. Her hair was messy and matted, her skin was in rough shape, and her eyes were bright red as if she had been crying. She stared absently into space.

"It's been a long time, Lady Yuri." I did my best to speak evenly so as not to reveal my shock.

“Yes, it has, Lady Iris.” Yuri laughed sarcastically as she turned toward me.

“Why did you want to see me?”

“No particular reason. I just wanted to see you before I died.” Her eyes and smile were ice-cold. Before, she would have never dared to show that in public, but strangely it didn’t surprise me. This more accurately reflected the person she had been all along. “Are you satisfied?”

Now it was my time to let out a sarcastic laugh. “I don’t know. I thought I would be, but I don’t feel anything.”

“Well, well.”

I wondered why in the world she had made me travel so far to see her if this was all she wanted, but I didn’t say that out loud. “May I ask you something else, then?” Yuri didn’t respond. I took that as a yes, so I continued. “Did you ever truly love Edward?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Pure curiosity.”

Yuri laughed. She did it loudly, with her mouth open wide as if she were scorning me. The sight was so terrible that it sent a shiver down my spine.

“Why? Because you don’t want to admit that the man you loved was stolen by someone who only wanted to use him for her own ends?” Yuri’s voice suddenly sharpened. “I know you’ve already heard I was working for Tweil. It was my job to seduce the highest-ranking noble I could to cause chaos in this kingdom.”

“Yes, I know.”

“So? How does it feel to know that he died protecting me? Protecting the woman he loved? He *loved* me. You desperately wanted him to love you, yet he never did, despite being forced into your engagement. How does that make you feel? Angry? Hateful?” Every word she uttered was an attack. But I wasn’t the one who her words had hurt. It seemed to me that she was hurting herself.

“Tell me you’re angry! Tell me you hate me!” Yuri lunged toward me, grabbing the iron bars. We were close enough to touch.

“So you *did* love him.”

Yuri lifted her face. “Huh? What in the world are you talking about?” She sounded so insulted that I had to laugh.

“Oh, am I wrong? Everything you just said made it sound like you were besotted.”

Yuri didn’t answer. I thought she would get defensive and deny it, no matter the truth, but she said nothing. As I studied her face, her eyes filled with tears that then streamed down her cheeks. She *had* loved him. The sight of her in that instant gave me more confirmation than a hundred words ever could.

“I-I don’t understand,” she said, looking back down.

I stared at her for a while longer, but she seemed frozen in place.

“I’m not angry,” I said firmly. “He and I were engaged a long time ago, then we went down two very different paths. What he did afterward is no concern of mine.”

Yuri looked up once again and glared at me, her eyes overflowing with hatred.

“Besides, you’re the one who Edward chose to love. No matter what you think, he was able to protect you. That’s all he wanted, right? Even though I think it’s a shame that he died, I would never hate anyone for those reasons.”

“I can’t stand the peaceful look on your face!”

I had to let out a chuckle. “Well, there’s nothing I can do about that.”

“You were born with everything! Status, money, and a bright future! Surrounded by people who loved you! I hate people like you!” Yuri screamed at me as she shook the iron bars. The sound of them clanging was as shrill as her screams.

“That’s why you tortured me?”

“Hmph. Served you right.” Yuri laughed with amusement. A dark laugh.

“I see.” It annoyed me to learn that she had put me through hell for such a ridiculous reason. I supposed you never knew what could set someone off. That didn’t make me feel any better, as the target of her petty harassment.

“What’s so different about you and me, anyway?! I’m much prettier and more charismatic than you! The fact that Ed chose me is proof of that! So why did I end up here?!” she screamed at me.

Something inside of me snapped. I raised my hand high to slap her as hard as I could across the face. Unfortunately, the iron bars stood in the way of my ability to make contact with her. Instead, my hand hit the bars, and it was quite painful. The metal let out a shrill shriek in place of her skin.

I knew that everyone around me wondered what in the world I thought I was doing, and even Yuri looked bewildered for a moment. My heart hurt more than my hand. “Pardon me for saying it, but you and I are *incredibly* different!”

“How? Our birthright? Don’t tell me it comes down to luck!”

“Please, no one would say that! What good is charisma if all you do with it is use people for your own selfish desires? I trust the people around me and depend on them!” I blurted out, raising my voice without meaning to.

“Wh-what’s so different about that?!” It seemed I had touched a sore spot. Yuri glared at me even more intensely than before.

“Do you even understand what I’m saying? All you do is use people. Once you’re finished with them or they become inconvenient to you, you throw them away like so much refuse. No one would ever trust someone like you! If someone did get close, it would only be to use you in return!”

Yuri gasped and fell silent. I had hit the nail on the head.

“Trust is the belief that someone is dependable and good. Depending on someone means you put your trust in them. You can’t have one without the other. When I can trust someone, that means I need them. If something happens, I would protect them with my life! So don’t you *dare* compare yourself to me!” I screamed so loud my throat went dry. I took a few deep breaths to compose myself.

“How...” Yuri said something so quietly that I couldn’t hear it over my ragged breaths. “How can you trust people? How could anyone ever trust someone again after what happened to you?”

“What, you mean when Ed broke off our engagement? Or when you stole my

employees? Or when—”

“All of it. Especially your engagement. The person you loved rejected you. Your own brother joined him in that.”

Honestly, I had asked myself that same question, over and over again. So it was funny to hear her asking the same. I couldn’t help but laugh. “Well...to tell you the truth, I was afraid to trust people, and that made me build a wall around myself. But the people who had served me all along remained. They told me they would follow me always, no matter what, and gradually they broke down the wall I’d made.”

I had been terrified of trusting again only to have that trust betrayed. My heart had been too deeply wounded. I was afraid of showing vulnerability, so I pretended that everything was all right. The ones who had broken through my stubbornness were my childhood friends—and Dean.

“Sometimes I still get scared, but now I realize that trusting people isn’t so bad after all. If you’re too afraid to trust, then you forget how wonderful it is to share both the good and the bad with other people. If you just summon a little courage to try, the world can be a truly wonderful place.” I looked toward Tanya, and she smiled proudly at me.

“They might betray you,” said Yuri.

“They might. But if I sit around being afraid all the time, I’ll never get anywhere. If you lose yourself in fear, you turn your back on all the wonderful things in life. It’s your loss. This world isn’t a kind place. It’s impossible to live in without getting hurt from time to time. So when you get hurt, you just have to dust yourself off and keep living.”

“I see.” Yuri smiled. It made her look possessed. “I was right. I hate you.”

I smiled back. “I hate you too.”

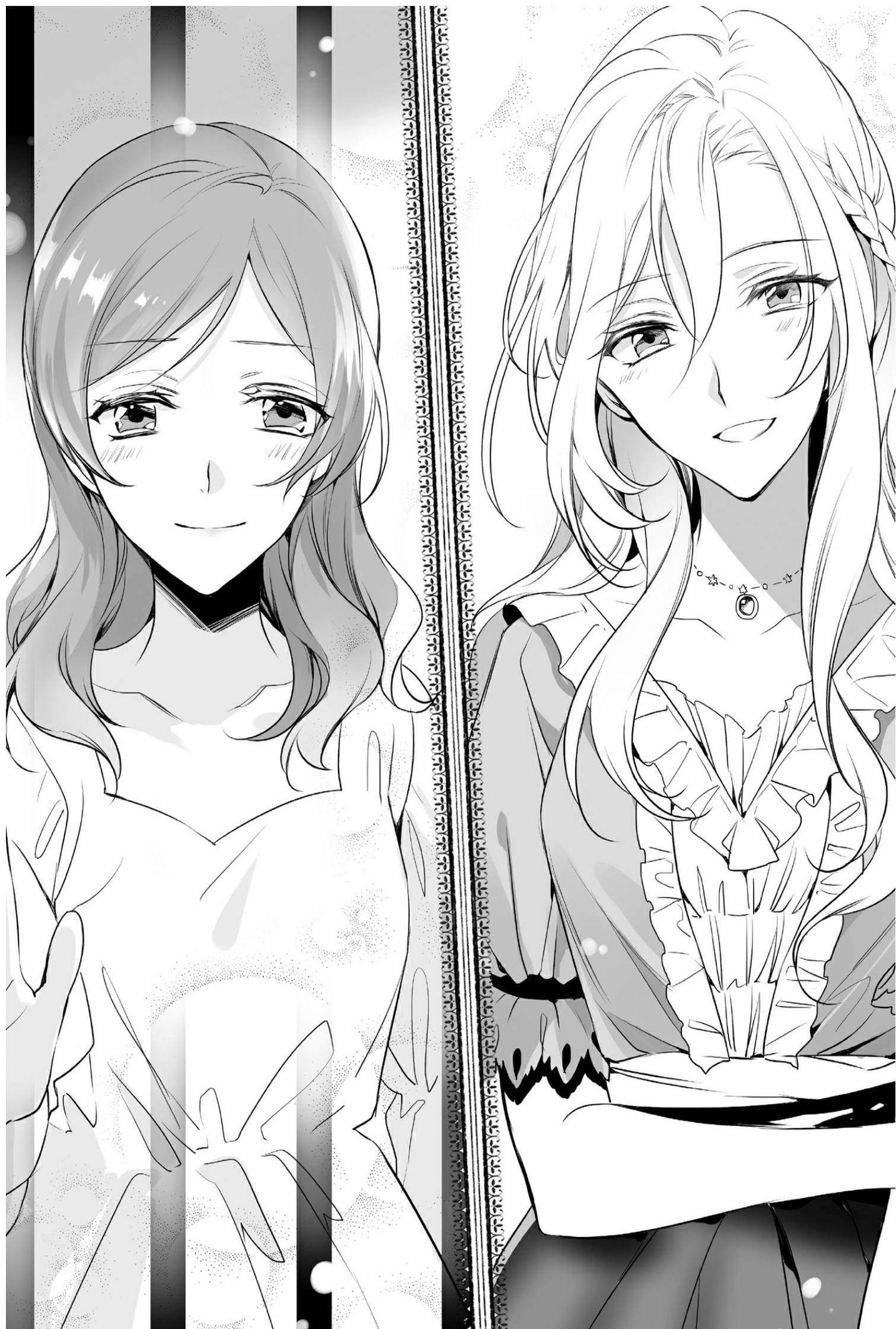
“Oh. It would be sickening if you said you liked me at this point.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

We both laughed.

“Lady Iris. What do you think it means to love someone?”

“I don’t know. It’s not the sort of thing one can explain. It means you think that person is more special than anyone else. I think that’s probably what love is.”



“Special... Yes...” Yuri smiled again, this time looking like she might cry. “I’m a fool. I only realized how important he was to me when I was grieving him.”

“Yes. You’re a fool.”

I smiled at her. I was also on the verge of tears because of her words. “I had so many chances to tell him. Now I can’t. I’m a fool too. We’re both complete fools.”

Yuri’s eyes widened.

“Ah, I’m not talking about Ed. Of course I do mourn his death, though.”

“You do?” Her voice trembled.

“Who, Ed?” I asked, and she nodded. “Yes. Someone close to me said, ‘Even if the person was someone you absolutely despised, it’s difficult to feel hatred for them when they die. You start to remember the good times instead of focusing on the reasons you disliked them. It’s the best way for those left behind to cope.’ It’s true that before he died, I despised him from the bottom of my heart. But we did share good memories. So, I mourn his death.”

Tears streamed freely down Yuri’s face. “I thought no one would mourn him. The only people who truly loved him were Queen Ellia and Lord Marea, but they’re dead too... And I...”

“Well, at the very least, I do grieve for him. I’m sure there are a lot of other people who do too. You’re just not aware of it. People are complicated and have many facets.”

“I see... I’m glad, then, that his name isn’t only associated with bad things.” Yuri let out a relieved sigh through her tears, almost making me cry again.

I could tell how much she loved Edward now. She was afraid of people saying he was evil and that idea taking root in the people’s minds. What else could you call it but love, if she was more concerned with his reputation than hers?

Finally, Yuri stopped crying, and her expression was clear. “Lady Iris... Go home. I’ll tell the princess everything.”

“Is that right? Well then, do take care, Lady Yuri.” We had nothing more to say to each other.

“Do take care, Lady Iris.” Yuri smiled at me. It was just how she used to smile. Then I left.

“Princess Leticia would like you to wait in her study, Sister.”

“All right. Don’t you want to hear what Yuri has to say?”

“She wishes to speak to the princess alone.”

“I see. Yes, please show me to her study, in that case.”

We left the tower and went back the way we came. “Sister, about what—”

“If you’re going to apologize again for what happened back then, there’s no need. You already did.”

“True enough.”

“And that’s why I’ll tell you my answer as to whether I should become head of House Armelia. If the apology you gave me then came from the bottom of your heart, then I can’t become the heir.”

“Those are two separate matters. I truly believe you would be the more appropriate governor of Armelia. I’ve already brought it up to Father, and he’s approved. We have all the necessary documents prepared.”

“What?!”

“To be honest, I’m glad that nothing came of Acacia’s proposal. As someone who works for the kingdom, it would be a great loss for Tasmeria if we were to lose someone with your talents.”

“You’re overestimating me.”

“I’m not. Why are you being so stubborn about not becoming governor?” Berne asked. “You’re the firstborn, and you have numerous achievements to show for your work. Is it because you’re a woman? Why would being a woman have any negative effect on your being head of house?”

He had hit the nail on the head. My greatest hesitation in this was the fact of my womanhood. I had thought all along it would be best for me to withdraw. Now that someone pointed out my doubt, I was speechless. I should withdraw from governance because I was a woman? Why? The more I thought, the less I

could reason my way around it. The only thing that came to mind was the phrase: “That’s what’s expected of you.”

“If the position of head of house would be too heavy for you to bear and you wish to be free, then I won’t force you. But...”

“Aren’t you contradicting yourself?”

“I was going to say, but you’ve already shouldered the burden and carried out your responsibilities wonderfully. Even so, as your family...as your brother, I wouldn’t want you to suffer under a burden you could no longer bear.”

“I see.”

I took a deep breath. I asked myself how I felt in my heart. What did I want my future to be? Two paths stretched before me. I could either continue being the governor, or not. The latter road forked in countless directions.

“Let me ask you one more thing,” I said. “You honestly don’t mind what I choose?”

“Correct. I won’t object no matter your decision.”

“All right. Then Berne, I shall take you up on your offer and become head of House Armelia.”

Berne beamed. “I see. I’m most pleased to hear that.”

We had reached Leticia’s study. Berne, Tanya, and I went inside.

“Please wait here,” Berne said. “I have a bit of business to attend to. I’ll have the servants bring you something, so Tanya, you may also wait here.”

“Thank you, Berne.”

After my brother left the room, I sank into my seat with a sigh.

“Are you sure about this, my lady?” Tanya asked with concern.

“About what?”

“Becoming head of house.”

“I’m sure. I have no regrets. I’m actually thrilled—I’ll get to stay with everyone now.”

"Is that right?" Tanya wore a relieved smile.

"Heh heh. Looks like we'll be staying put, Tanya! I'll be counting on you."

"Please count on me for as long as you want, my lady. I shall stay by your side until I wither."

"Goodness! I certainly don't want you to wither!"

We laughed.

Just then, there was a knock at the door, and a castle servant entered the room. She made us some tea then left us to ourselves. Honestly, Tanya's tea was much better, but beggars can't be choosers. I sat there quietly for a while, enjoying the warmth. So much had happened today. I let the hot tea wash away all the stress I had gathered within.

"Excuse me. I'm so sorry I kept you waiting, Lady Iris."

"Your Highness! Thank you so much for allowing me to relax in here."

"I'm pleased that you were able to do so!" Leticia walked over and sat in front of me. "Thanks to you, Yuri gave her testimony. Now we will be able to proceed with censuring the nobles whom we previously lacked sufficient evidence against. Thank you."

"Of course. I'm just glad I could be a bit of help."

"A *bit* of help? You've already brought us the best possible outcome here, not to mention your successful negotiation with the kingdom of Acacia! I really can't thank you enough."

"I'm honored."

"Lady Iris... Will you become head of House Armelia?"

"Yes. Has Berne told you?"

"Yes and no. It came up in conversation, so I heard a bit. It seems as though he broached the subject with you today?"

"He did."

"You've agreed?"

“Yes, I will officially become Armelia’s governor.”

Happiness spread across Leticia’s face. “I see! Just between you and me...I’m going to succeed the throne.”

I’d had a feeling that would happen; after all, now that both Edward and Alfred were gone, she was the only one left in the line of succession.

“Things will be different from how they were when my grandmother was queen. I won’t merely be a link to the next generation. I’ve secured all rights and authority as ruler.”

“Oh my! That’s amazing!” Now I was surprised. I’d always had a feeling Leticia would be able to accomplish such a thing, but to hear she had succeeded was something else.

Her grandmother Iria had reigned as queen, but once someone of royal blood married into the next generation, she ceded her power. It left the strong impression that her reign had been primarily a stopgap until the next bloodline heir.

Leticia’s reign would be different. She would be the very first true queen in Tasmeria’s history. I was certain that this hadn’t been an easy path for her; she’d had to confront the preconceived notions of what a monarch should be and continuously break them down.

“I’m ready for it,” said Leticia. “And I’ve already started my journey. I’m looking forward to your continued support, Lady Iris.”

“As I look forward to yours.”

“There’s something else. I suppose you could call it an expression of my gratitude for the matter with Acacia, or perhaps a reward. I’m thinking of designating Armelia a special territory and giving you freedom of discretion, to a certain extent.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“Well, you know that my brother enacted a centralized system of government during his reign?”

“Yes, of course.”

“To put it plainly, I want to exempt you and Armelia from that. You may govern Armelia how you see fit.”

The moment this really sunk in, it took my breath away. Leticia’s tone was lighthearted, but she was offering me something incredibly serious. “Are you sure?”

Leticia giggled. “You’re asking me that too? My personal feelings on the matter are of no consequence—this is best for the kingdom. I notified the nobility, and there were no complaints. That doesn’t surprise me; they did Ellia’s bidding when she tried to interfere with Armelia and turned a blind eye to all the harassment Edward inflicted upon you, all while trying to profit from those grievances. Moreover, they were powerless to help you in your recent crisis.”

I couldn’t agree or do anything else but give a vague nod. I couldn’t believe Leticia had already notified the other nobles and gotten their approval. Everything was happening so fast. If that was how much faith they had in Armelia, then I had nothing else to say. I would accept this amazing opportunity.

“Thank you, my liege. I will continue to work tirelessly for Armelia. Nothing would make me happier than being able to help the kingdom.”

“I’m so pleased to hear you say that.”

And so my meeting with Leticia ended on a happy note.

After I finished my business at the castle, I returned to the Armelia mansion in the capital.

“I’m so glad you’re safe.” My father had finally returned from the castle himself, so I was able to see him. His complexion looked better than the last time we met, when he was bedridden, but he still seemed pale. He hadn’t regained the weight he lost either. Despite all that, he was going to work every day, so I understood why Mother worried about him.

“Yes, thanks to everyone’s help.”

“There’s no need to be humble. I truly am so, so glad you’re safe.” Father gently took me in his arms. His warmth was so comforting that it seemed to go right through me, all the way to my heart.

“Thank...you...!”

We stayed like that for a while, then pulled apart.

“Berne told me everything,” he said. “You’ll take over, then?”

“You’re not against it, Father?”

“Why would I be? Who in their right mind *could* be, considering everything you’ve done? Especially seeing how things are in Armelia now.”

My heart ached with pride and joy. “I see...”

“What’s more, Berne found his own path. At any rate, no one has any objections. By the way, I’ve already told Berne, but I would like to proceed at once and formally instate you as governor as soon as tomorrow.”

“Ah, that’s awfully sudden, isn’t it?”

“I’ve been considering it for some time. It would be difficult for me physically speaking to undertake the same amount of work I used to. All the necessary documents are in order, and I know you’re already comfortable with your duties, so there are no concerns there.”

“Is it really that bad, Father?”

“There’s nothing for you to worry about. I’m fine as long as I don’t overexert myself.” He smiled softly and quietly to ease my fears.

“All right...” Truthfully, that smile made me worry about his condition even more, but I couldn’t press him any further at present.

“So? Are you prepared, then?”

“Yes. I was ready to bear the responsibility for Armelia a long time ago.”

“I see. Well, I won’t give you any further advice but for this: If things ever get difficult, speak up any time. You have me, Merry, and many others ready by your side.”

The next day, I officially became the governor of Armelia—and thus, head of

House Armelia. My father and Berne had already arranged the necessary documents; all I had to do was sign. I thought there would be some manner of formal ceremony, but with the kingdom preoccupied with cleaning up the aftermath of the war, there was no time for such things.

Thus, there was no big emotional to-do; it was done with the single stroke of my pen. Not that I had a problem with that, mind you.

The following day, I took a carriage back to Armelia.

“Are you sure you want to go home so soon, my lady?” Even Tanya seemed bewildered by my whirlwind of a trip.

“Yes. Although my connections in the capital are important, it would only be a waste of time to remain there with how things are during recovery from the war effort. It’s best if I return to Armelia.”

“I see.”

“We’ll be even busier now, Tanya,” I said with a smile. My mind felt as clear as the sunny blue skies outside the carriage window. The warm breeze caressed my cheek as the scenery flew past us.

So much had happened. So many roadblocks and tears along the way. So much pain. At the same time, so many smiles and so much laughter. I’d received boundless warmth. I knew there would be more pain, tears, and hesitations in the future. I was prepared for all of it. I wanted to see what lay beyond this path—the bright, shining future. So I would keep going, with everyone at my side.

Final Chapter:

The Duke's Daughter's Happiness

AFTER I RETURNED to Armelia, I reassumed my position as governor. Truth be told, my duties didn't change from what they had been before. I spent every day at my desk, swamped with work. However, it was much easier to accomplish things now that I didn't have to worry about outside interference.

I received an official announcement that Leticia would be crowned queen. Her coronation would be held in one year, after the mourning period for Alfred reached the end of its course. I would attend the coronation as governor of Armelia. It would be my first official event since I formally became head of House Armelia, so in other words, it would be my debut as well.

One year. I let out a sigh. Several months had already passed since Dean's death. It felt like such a long time. At times the pain would wash over me, just as Mother had said it would. But I cherished even that pain; it was proof of how deeply I'd loved him.

"Where are you going, my lady?"

I was walking out the door of my study when I ran into Tanya, who was holding a stack of documents. "Just out for a walk."

"Then I shall come with y—"

"No need. I'll stay on the grounds." I smiled and left her there, then proceeded outside.

The spring air enveloped me like a warm embrace. I stretched and my joints made a series of unseemly popping noises. I got so tense sitting at a desk all day. Taking in the beautiful gardens soothed my heart. I gazed up at the clear blue sky.

"Are you up there somewhere, Dean?" I whispered aloud, clutching my pocket watch. I knew it was the stuff of fairy tales, but I really did believe our loved ones watched over us from above after they were gone. Perhaps it would

be more accurate to say that I clung to the belief because I wanted it to be true.

“No, I’m not up there.”

All of a sudden, someone answered me. The voice was familiar, and hearing it made my entire body freeze. I didn’t want to believe it was true.

“It can’t be...” I thought I must be hallucinating, and although I trembled with happiness, my rational mind told me to calm down.

Yet the voice continued. “Forgive me, my lady. I told you so many lies.”

Tears streamed down my face. It wasn’t a hallucination. It wasn’t an illusion. My voice quavered as I asked, “What kind of lies?”

“Too many to count. I lied about my family, that I was the son of a merchant. I lied when I pretended to be fine after hearing of your proposal. Most of all...I lied about being dead.”

“I don’t care about any of that!”

I turned and ran into his arms. He was here. It was really him. Alfred Dean Tasmeria. I broke down in sobs when I felt his warmth and heard the sound of his heartbeat. He was alive. He was really alive!

“The only thing I ever wanted was for you to be alive!” I cried.

He wrapped his arms around me. I knew it wasn’t my imagination that his hands were shaking. Overcome by emotion, I squeezed him tighter. I wanted the certainty that he was really there. We embraced in this way, sharing each other’s heat. I’d missed him—I had missed him so much! So much that I couldn’t even bear it. I thought I would never see him again, yet I’d still yearned for him and clung to his memory.

“But...how?”

“It’s true that I was struck by a stray arrow,” he said. “And indeed, I almost died. Thanks to the efforts of my physician, I was revived. However, news of my death had already spread to the capital before I woke.”

“Goodness! Well, are you all right? Are you in pain?”

“I’m fine now; I’m fully recovered,” he said with a smile.

I let out a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness...”

“The only person who knows that I was revived is the doctor who treated me... And he’s agreed to keep my secret.”

“But why?”

“Letty told me I wasn’t suited to be king and to withdraw because she wanted the throne. So, it all worked out for the best in the end.” Dean laughed with amusement. “She told me to do as I pleased. So I decided I wanted to return to my old work.”

Dean reached up to his cheek where my hand rested and clasped it with his own. “My whole life, I thought my only options were to become king or die. There was no other path. Everything I did was in pursuit of assuming the throne, and I pulled everyone around me into that same end.”

I listened quietly as he poured his heart out to me.

“But...I was different when I was here. I didn’t think about those things. I simply, purely enjoyed working with you.”

“Dean...” It sounded very much like a confession of love. My heart pounded out of control as I listened to him.

“I hoped, I prayed for a different future. One we had never seen before, the kind we dreamed about building together.” He squeezed my hand tighter. “Until now, I only worked for you under a short-term contract. But I want to transition to a more permanent position. Is there room here for a ghost like me?”

“Dean! Yes, of course!”

The world at large thought him dead, so he had no social standing. I didn’t care. After everything I had been through and the despair I had endured, a bit of trouble like this was nothing at all.

Dean knelt in front of me, still holding my hand, almost like a knight would before a princess in a fairy tale.

“Wha—Dean?!” It all happened so quickly that I didn’t know what to do.

He smiled at me and shook his head. Then he gazed up at me, a strong light in

his eyes. It was absolutely captivating. "I love you."

My whole mind went blank. The words were simple. But so much emotion resonated in them that tears streamed endlessly down my face.

"I've lied to you so many times. I'm nothing but a ghost now, with no social standing, a man who can never appear as myself in public. But I truly love you. I know I will be a great burden, but I can't give up on you. I want to walk by your side forever. Will you spend the rest of your life with me?"

My cheeks flushed as he spoke. I was so happy, my heart felt like it would burst. "That's all you're worried about?" I took his hand.

"What do you mean, 'that's all'? There are multiple serious considerations. First of all, a man of uncertain parentage and no social standing is unfit to marry a head of house. On top of that, I have royal blood and a rightful claim to the throne. As I said, I could never be seen by those who might recognize me."

"That's not important to me, Dean. What's important is that we can *be* together! I thought you were dead! So compared to that, anything else is trivial! It's a miracle that you're here with me now. Also..."

I pulled him up to his feet and threw my arms around him. His eyes widened with surprise.

"Also, you could have chosen the crown over me. Even if you had come back as the king, I'm already head of House Armelia. I have no intention of giving that up, and I don't want to either. No matter how much I love you."

"Iris..."

"Listen, Dean. I'm a truly troublesome woman. I love you, but I'm greedy. I can't change the path that I'm walking down. I love this place and all the people who live here." I wouldn't give that up, no matter how much I loved him.

"That's one of the reasons why I love you," he said with a smile.

"Dean..."

We gazed at each other, consumed by our reflections in each other's eyes.

"Promise me one thing," I said, and his gaze grew focused. "I can't bear going through that again. Please don't ever tell me a lie that will make me cry." I had

gone through such pain. It had hurt so badly that it was like my heart had been ripped in two. I couldn't bear it a second time.

"Of course. I'll never lie to you again." This time, Dean caressed my cheek. I turned into his touch, resting my face against it.

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you too," I said. "I want to be closer to you than anyone because...I love you."

I was finally able to say it. Those three words were so simple, but they contained so much emotion. Saying them left me so satisfied and relieved.

Dean leaned toward me, and I closed my eyes. We kissed.

I love him.



I was so grateful that he was alive, and for everything that had happened. A violent surge overcame my heart. I was exploding with emotion, so much so that I wanted to scream. I wanted to make every part of him mine. I couldn't think about anything else. As I verged on losing myself in those feelings, I hoped that he felt the same about me.

We slowly stepped apart from each other. "W-we should probably go back." I said shyly, afraid that we would be swept away in these emotions.

"You're right," he agreed, his face slightly pink. It was so adorable that I couldn't help but laugh.

"I know that everyone will welcome you back with open arms. They were devastated when they heard you had died."

"I'm not sure... The people in Borsa will probably think I clawed my way out of hell just to torture them."

"Good point."

We held hands. A smile crept across my face as I felt the warmth from his fingertips. My heart was warm too, knowing I'd be able to walk by his side forever now. "Let's go, Dean!"

"All right."

Several years later, Dean and I were happily married and spending our days together. The only people who knew his true identity were my family and Leticia, and my childhood friends who worked with me. Our official public statement was that I had married a commoner. Of course, things were quite hectic leading up to our marriage. My family had no objections, but the nobility had plenty to say. More specifically, there was a barrage of demands from families that I should marry their second or third sons.

But with Leticia's support and that of the nobles who didn't want Armelia becoming any more powerful than it already was, we were finally able to wed.

For obvious reasons, it was a small ceremony, just us and both of our families, as well as some close attendants. That didn't matter to me. The most important

thing was that we were together. Our happiest guest of all seemed to be the queen dowager, Iria. She broke into sobs during our ceremony and had to keep taking deep breaths. She said we had finally made her long-held dream come true, but I wasn't sure what that meant exactly. Dean did let out a chuckle.

Things were going smoothly with my work as the governor too. That made sense, given that there was no longer anyone to undermine my endeavors as Ed had when he was in charge. What's more, I had Dean by my side as my adviser. Our ambitions were realized much faster once he officially took on that role. The people who celebrated his new job the most were those who worked in Borsa. They had tearfully welcomed him back after his return...although I'm sure they knew that meant things were about to get busier.

Of course, that didn't mean life was problem-free. It seemed the word "peaceful" didn't exist in the vocabulary of my life. Even so, my staff were the most hardworking people in history, and we somehow made it.

At present, the most populated city in all of Tasmeria was located in Armelia. Cutting-edge innovations were developed at the academy and put into practice in marketplaces and businesses. Schools and hospitals were established in cities across the duchy so that every citizen could learn how to read or receive treatment when they fell sick or were injured.

Marketplaces were filled with exotic goods from Acacia, delighting the customers. Our alliance with Acacia was thriving, and thanks to our good relationship, they passed on new technology and advances they developed to Armelian shores.

The Azuta Corporation had become one of the leading companies in Tasmeria, and one of the largest as well. We were planning to expand our operations to Acacia. Khadir and I still exchanged letters. From time to time, he would send another impassioned request for me to move to Acacia, so it seemed he hadn't quite given up on me yet. Of course, he framed it not romantically but as a business proposal.

Even so, every time Dean found one of those letters, he got a bit grumpy. It was my little secret that I thought his reaction was incredibly adorable.

Back in the capital, Leticia was doing an incredible job as the kingdom's first

true queen, with Berne by her side. Much to my surprise, they were married a couple of years after she took the throne. I still remember my shock when I heard the news. Dean told me he had a hunch that would happen, but neither of us had thought they would actually marry. However, the most shocking thing was that Leticia was the one who proposed! When I asked her what had made her fall for Berne, she replied, “His sensitivity, and the way he thinks,” whatever that meant. I didn’t want to ask anything else, so I didn’t press the matter.

“I’ve brought you some tea, my lady.”

“Tanya! I told you before that you don’t need to do that!” Tanya, my trusted secretary and incredibly skilled spy, was presently with child. The father was Dida! When she announced she was getting married, it sent shock waves through the mansion, but that settled down once they found out the identity of her husband-to-be.

“I can manage this much, my lady. Besides, a little exercise is good for us.”

“Who was it that always scolded me about not working while I was pregnant?” I glared at her, and her eyes darted around for a moment before she relented.

“My apologies. I promise I’ll go rest after I put this down.”

“Good. Why don’t you go ahead and rest right there?” I pointed to the comfortable chair in my study that I kept for guests.

Tanya visibly hesitated. “But...”

“It’s fine. I don’t have any other appointments today anyway. It’s an order from the governor! I want you to rest for a bit.”

“Very well, then, if you insist.”

After Tanya sat down, I walked over to her and caressed her belly. “I’m so excited to meet this little one.”

“So am I. If you would allow it...I would love for my child to serve your children once they get older.” Tanya smiled shyly as she rubbed her own stomach.

“Let’s leave that up to them,” I answered with a wry smile.

There was a glint in her eye. “So you’d give your permission?”

“Yes... Yes, of course. I know that I can trust a child of yours and Dida’s implicitly.”

“I’m honored. I’ll train our children well, so that they can serve you and your family, my lady. I hope you’ll look forward to it.”

“Y-yes, of course.” She was so emphatic that I found myself agreeing.

After Tanya rested for a while, she excused herself from my study, but I had another visitor. “Mother!”

“Why, hello, Elpis!” It was my child, my son with Dean. Elpis had inherited his beautiful silver hair and his eye color from me, but his handsome features were all his father’s. “What is it? Why are you alone?” I asked.

Just then, Dean came into the room.

“Now, Elpis, how many times have I told you that you mustn’t wander around where the business is conducted?” He scolded our son as he carried our baby daughter, Luce, in his arms. She was finally starting to hold her head up on her own. She was the opposite of Elpis; she had Dean’s hair and eye color, but she looked exactly like me in every other way.

“Hello, Luce!” I held my arms out toward her, and she happily lay in my embrace. I smiled as I caressed her head. “You certainly love watching us work, don’t you, Elpis?”

“Yes! It’s really neat!”

“Is it, now?”

“Yes. It’s wonderful seeing everyone work so hard for our people. There aren’t any super strong heroes like in fairy tales or anything, but when everyone works together, they have the strength of a hero! Don’t you think that’s just lovely?”

Elpis was a precocious child, although I supposed that shouldn’t have surprised, given his parents. Dean said he had been just like that as a boy, so perhaps they also had similar personalities.

“Yes, I do! Do you think you’d like to work like them someday, Elpis?”

“Yes!” he answered enthusiastically.

I smiled and reached down to pat his head. “I’m looking forward to it. I’m especially looking forward to the day when you understand that this work is more than just wonderful. It’s a very important responsibility.”

“Your mother’s right. Right now, your desire to work here doesn’t sound very serious, but one day, you’ll—”

“We’re not saying you can’t do it, Elpis. Actually, I think it’s great that you already know what you want to do with your life, because you’re still a child.” My son blinked at me. “Childhood aspirations are so special because they aren’t calculated. I think it’s wonderful to find something you purely enjoy. But you must work hard to achieve the things you want in life. Once opportunities become very real, if you still decide you wish to go down this path, then you should do so with all your might. If you decide to go down a different path, then do that instead. The most important thing is to give everything your all.”

“I will. I’ll work very hard, Mother!”

“Not too hard, though. I’ll be sad if you grow up too quickly! I want to enjoy my adorable little Elpis for a while longer.” Both Elpis and Dean laughed. “Elpis, Dean... Go ahead and call me a doting mother, I don’t care!”

“I-I don’t think that at all, Mother! I’m happy you said it!” Elpis frantically started, then finished with a shy smile.

I couldn’t help but smile back at him. Our son and daughter were the most adorable children in the whole world.

Dean lifted Elpis into his arms. “Is being a doting parent a bad thing? Because I know I am. Actually, I’m also a doting husband. How could I not be, with the smartest, most beautiful wife in the whole world? I’m a doting father because she bore us the most beautiful children in the whole world too.”

“Dean...”

“Would my lovely wife care to take a break from work and spend some family time together?”

“I think I’ll take my lovely husband up on that offer. None of this work is

urgent, and I can fill you in on it later. Oh, I know! Let's eat some of Merida's goodies that she sent up for me and take a break together!"

We both held a child in our arms and walked closely together, happy smiles on our faces.

Armelia continued to grow and develop at breakneck speed. The story of Iris Lana Armelia was passed down through generations as the ancestor who rejuvenated the family dynasty. Her impressive number of accomplishments included establishing a banking institution, making education compulsory and free of charge, tax reform, developing medical treatments and insurance, and the strengthening of roads and infrastructure.

It would take another century before these reforms were implemented across the world. Nevertheless, she was hailed throughout history as a remarkable genius for introducing these important measures that improved quality of life for the people.

Armelia's development and ingenuity was a blessing to Tasmeria, which also experienced shocking growth.

Iris was further famous for having married for love, which was incredibly unusual for someone of her status. Her husband's parentage was shrouded in mystery, but the story went that he always supported her from the shadows, and his talents rivaled her own. Historians believe he might have served the Armelian family at one time or another, as there were no records of him ever objecting to Iris's plans. Nevertheless, the story of their true love, one that crossed the boundary of class, became the inspiration for an untold number of romance novels, capturing the hearts of young women even today.

Countless stories and legends feature the passionate duke's daughter, who adored her citizens and was in turn adored by them. The name Iris Lana Armelia will be etched upon the hearts of the Armelian people forevermore.

Afterword

WE'VE FINALLY REACHED the end of our main story. I can't believe I was able to write five whole volumes. I'm filled with so many different emotions. Thank you so much to my readers, who stuck with me the whole way. During the course of writing this book, I somehow lost my data. After agonizing over what to do, I decided to trash the story I'd written to that point and start over anew, but then unfortunately, my computer froze.

Once I was able to get it working again, I was able to recover my file from Word...but it only recovered the part of the story I'd decided to trash! It was my fault for not saving often enough. In fact, I'd made this mistake before, but what's that old proverb? "Danger past and God forgotten." So for a while, I had a hard time writing.

Anyway, I digress. The hardest thing about writing this story was that Iris is such a workaholic. Before I started writing the series, I had decided on a plot outline, but once I actually began to write and the story unfolded, Iris would say, "Stop!" and rush back into her study. She didn't want to come out for me to write about the everyday happenings of her life. So honestly, when Tanya tells her, "Why don't you take a break?" That's actually my voice coming into the story. Many times, I would sit in front of the computer and hope that Iris would leave her study this time.

It was because of her devotion to her work that I was able to continue writing the story. I admired her for working so hard and risking everything for the ones she loved, and her ability to keep plodding forward. That was why I empathized with the ones who worked for Iris. I cried along with them when she worked too hard, and I admired her just like they did.

I'm so thankful for the characters in this book. Although the main story has concluded, the series continues in the form of a prequel. It features a major character of the fifth volume. Yes, the protagonist of the story going forward will be Merellis, Iris's mother. I want to describe how she felt when she first picked up a sword and went through training, then went to war.

I hope you'll continue reading and also pick up the manga. The thoughts and feelings show on the characters' faces, and they look so alive in the illustrations. Thank you so much to Suki Umemiya for bringing the world of the duke's daughter alive with your drawings.

I'd like to thank some more people.

To my editors—I apologize for all the trouble I caused! I'm sorry for wanting to change details at the last minute, and for wanting to add to scenes here and there. Thank you so much for your support.

Thank you to the people around me who supported me while I wrote this series.

To Haduki Futaba, thank you so much for your beautiful illustrations. When I first saw the rough draft of the cover for Volume 5, I was overwhelmed by emotion. It reminded me of when I saw the cover for the first volume.

And to all of my readers, the only reason this last volume was published is because of your support and readership throughout this series. Thank you so much.

—REIA



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